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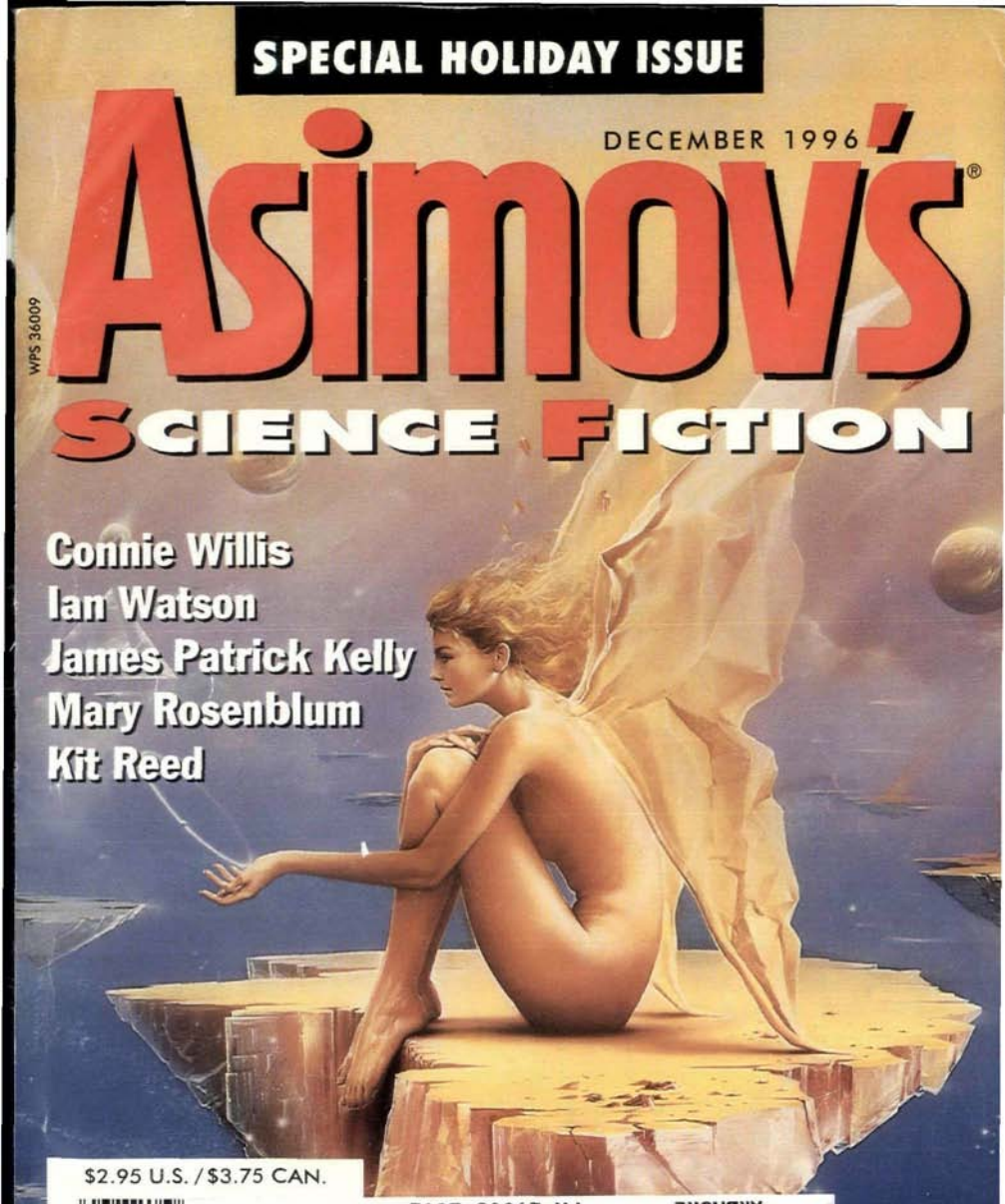

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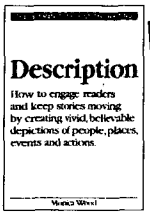
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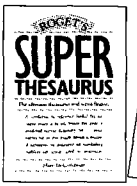

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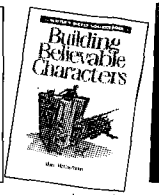

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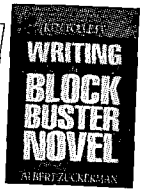

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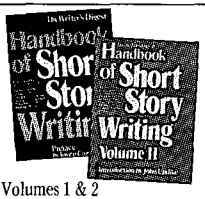

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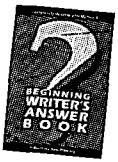

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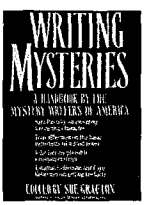

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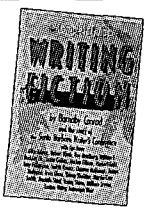

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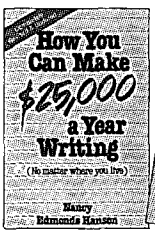

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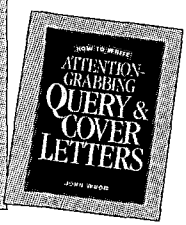

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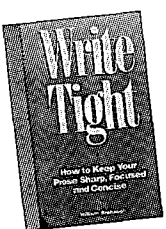

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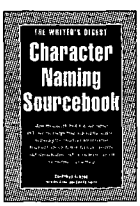

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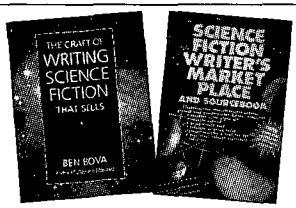

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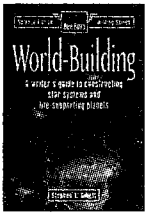

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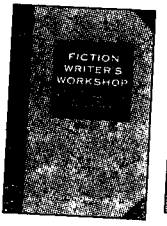

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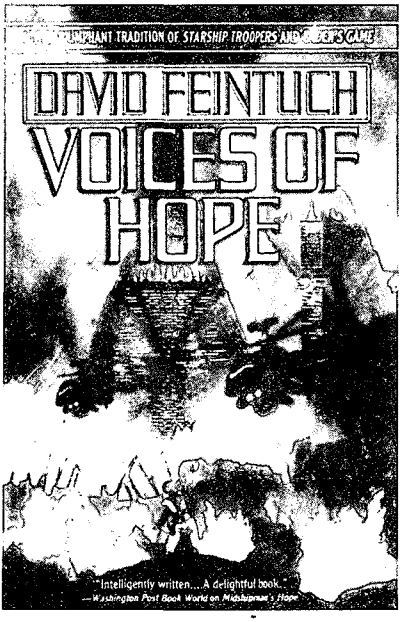
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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE ABLATIVE ABSOLUTE

I realized one morning last week, during that time in the vicinity of dawn when my mind is booting up for the day and all sorts of strange things go riffing through it, that I had forgotten what the ablative absolute is. All I could recall was that it had something to do with participles. The illustrative phrase, "The ship having sunk," came floating up out of memory, but just at that moment I had no confidence that that had anything to do with the real ablative absolute, which I suddenly was altogether unable to define, and I was horrified and appalled by the apparent loss of this vital bit of knowledge.

You probably never have faced a crisis of that sort, because the odds are that you never knew what the ablative absolute was in the first place. I suspect that if we ran a poll of the readers of this magazine, we'd find that no more than 1 percent of them had ever heard the phrase before, let alone ever had any understanding of its meaning. But I had an old-fashioned education, back there in the late Pleistocene, and the ablative absolute was once a very important part of my conceptual structure, forty-odd years ago. The fact that the term still remained in my mind, but seemed to be nothing more than an empty container now, disturbed me greatly. I was tempted to phone my friend Saul Diskin, out in Arizona, who sat next to me in Latin class for four years long ago, and ask him if he remembered it. (It was in collaboration with Saul that I wrote my first science fiction story, an item of less-than-award-winning caliber called "The Last Days of Saturn," somewhere around February of 1949.)

I didn't call Saul. I racked my brains for a while; and then, my brains having been racked, the essential nature of the ablative absolute returned, I am happy to report, to my awareness. I hadn't permanently forgotten it after all. I had just misplaced it temporarily—not surprising, considering how much stuff has been packed into my noggin in the four and a half decades since the estimable Karl Grebanier first instructed me in the essential facts of Latin grammar.

The ablative absolute is, of course, a verbal construction employed in the Latin language. I used one just a paragraph ago. ("My brains having been racked. . . .") "The ship having sunk" is a legitimate ablative absolute too, I am pleased to say. The term applies to nouns used in the ablative case combined with participles in the

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ablative case to describe the circumstances under which something is taking place.

Ablative? Case? Perhaps some background information is in order. "Case" is a technical grammatical term having to do with the role that a noun or pronoun plays in a sentence. "Ablative" is one of the seven Latin cases. (The others are nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, vocative, and locative.)

Cases exist in English, too—subjective, objective, possessive—but don't get a lot of attention from modern educators because English nouns, generally speaking, don't change form to indicate change of case, and because modern educators have a lot of more urgent things to worry about. We use the same word for "king" when saying "The king is cheerful today," "The work of a king never ends," "The behavior of the crown prince is a constant concern to the king," "The revolutionaries have beheaded the king," "The people expect miracles from the king," and so on. (Though English nouns don't have case endings, pronouns frequently do have different forms according to their function in the sentence. "I" is a subjective pronoun, "me" is objective, and that's why it's ungrammatical to say things like "just between you and I." But this is not a column about English grammar. It's about my struggle with the ablative absolute the other morning.)

The structural situation is entirely different in Latin. Nouns vary in form according to their place in a sentence. *Rex*, the nomi-

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native case form, means "king." *Regis,* the genitive, means "of the king." The dative, *regi,* is "to the king"; the accusative, *regem,* is used when the king is the object of action (as in beheading the king), and the ablative, *rege,* covers such uses as "from the king," among other things. Because Latin nouns vary this way by case, you can arrange the words in a Latin sentence in any order you please and it'll still make sense, since the meaning can be dug out of each word without reference to its neighbors.

Now, about the pesky ablative absolute—

As those successive instructors of bygone days, Mr. Grebanier, Mr. Macfarlane, Dr. Cussen, and Dr. Wedeck, had hoped I would never in all my days forget, the ablative absolute is a compact way of indicating ideas of time, cause, or condition. It can be employed with two nouns both in the ablative case—*Cicero consule,* "Cicero having been consul"—or with a noun and a participle—*Caesar ducente,* "Caesar commanding"—or, as is most common in my reawakened memory, with a noun and an adjective—*Oppido capto,* "the town having been captured." The wonderful precision and compactness of Latin shows up in these usages: *Oppido capto, milites discesserunt,* elegant and forceful, is how to say "The town having been captured, the soldiers departed." And so on and so on: "The tree having fallen, the squirrels scattered." "Jefferson being President, the government was in good hands." "The novel having been finished, the author packed his suitcase and headed for Hawaii."

I blush to say that I failed to comprehend, when I was a boy studying Latin in far-off exotic Brooklyn, just how beautiful the Latin system of cases is. English, of course, is my native language; and English long ago junked most of the case endings it once tacked to its nouns, replacing them with the little thingies we call prepositions. (You may have been taught that one should never end a sentence with a preposition; this rule descends from some notion of Latinate style, it being impossible to end a Latin sentence with a preposition, since the prepositions are built right into the nouns. The same Latin hangover has given us the rule against splitting infinitives, again something that simply can't be done in Latin, since both parts of the infinitive are packed into a single word. That is, the infinitive we represent as "to go" is the one word *ire* in Latin, and "to boldly go" comes out *ire audaciter.*)

Since in my innocent boyish way I preferred the familiar system of prepositions-with-unvarying-nouns to the cumbersome Latin way of having to memorize seven different noun forms for every word, I spent a whole weekend circa 1948 or 1949 compiling, with my buddy Saul, a system of Simplified Latin that invented a bunch of prepositions and conveniently eliminated the business of learning the declensions, as the noun forms are called.

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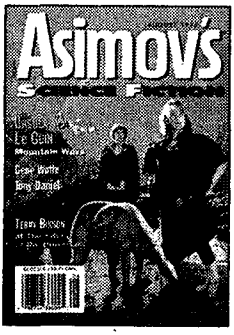

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Proudly we showed our handiwork to our teacher, Mr. Grebanier, on Monday morning. As I recall, he was impressed with our industriousness—we had covered pages and pages with our scheme for making Latin easier for ourselves—but he did mildly point out that all we had done, essentially, was to reinvent the Italian language. One can make a plausible argument that Italian is Latin with the declensions left out. It uses, just as English does, a welter of prepositions to replace the case endings ("da," "di," "de," etc.) and since these must be learned also, it's not particularly a simpler system than that used in the ancestral language: just different, and lacking in that useful Latin feature of infinitely rearrangeable word order.

And so the Silverberg-Diskin system for Latin Made Easy went into the circular file and Saul and I went back to the task of memorizing all those case endings. (Which have, I should point out, different forms for singular and plural nouns—"of the farmer" is *agricolae,* "of the farmers" is *agricolarum,* and also differ according to whether a noun is defined as masculine, feminine, or neuter, which is a whole other complication that Latin handles not entirely consistently. "Farmer" and "sailor" are masculine words with feminine endings; *domus,* "home," is a feminine word, though it has the masculine *-us* ending; and it all gets even trickier from there.) Despite these little glitches, it seems to me now that my having advocated,

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even for a moment, the elimination of Latin's declensions and verbal conjugations and other non-English features was entirely a mark of my adolescent laziness and shallowness. I've had decades now to reflect on the value of my having spent four years studying Latin, and I regard it now as one of the two key subjects of my secondary-school education. (The other one was typing.) I long ago came to see the splendor, the wonder, of Latin's lucidity and efficiency. Latin instilled in me a ferocious sense of the integrity of the sentence, of the importance of structure and balance in making any sort of construction out of words, of the inherent beauty and power of grammar. I am not only a better human being for having subjected myself to the discipline of Latin, I'm a better writer as well. It seems a pity to me that Latin is evidently not widely available to today's American high school students any more: their great loss, say I.

You can see, I hope, how shocked I was to awaken one morning feeling that I had forgotten what the ablative absolute is. Not that I am in any way fluent in Latin, not now, not after decades of disuse. But the language is still there, in my bones, in my style, and I'm immensely grateful for that. A close inspection of any of my books will show not only a range of vocabulary but also sentence constructions that derive wholly from my early knowledge of Latin. ("Not only . . . but also," for example. A direct translation of *non solum . . . sed etiam*, so familiar from Cicero's orations.) Latin is everywhere in my prose; and the ablative absolute is an important part of Latin, even as is the imperfect subjunctive, or the volitive substantive, which no doubt I will wake up wondering about some bright morning next summer.

Well, the ablative absolute turned out to be forgotten, but not gone. For an ugly hour or so that day I would have been unable to explain to you what it is, but the usage itself is embedded forever in my cerebral cortex. That much having been determined, the aging, forgetful scholar sighed in profound relief. ●

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Connie Willis

IN COPPELIUS'S TOYSHOP

Connie Willis returns to our pages with a Christmas tale that packs some sharp tidings. Her story *Remake* (Bantam Spectra), won the 1996 *Locus* Award for Best Novella, and is currently a finalist for the Hugo award for Best Novel. A collaborative novel with Cynthia Felice, *Promised Land*, will be out from Ace in the spring, and she is at work on a new time-travel book, *To Say Nothing of the Dog*.

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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So here I am, stuck in Coppelius's Toyshop, the last place I wanted to be. Especially at Christmas.

The place is jammed with bawling babies and women with shopping bags and people dressed up like teddy bears and Tinkerbell. The line for Santa Claus is so long it goes clear out the door and all the way over to Madison Avenue, and the lines at the cash registers are even longer.

There are kids everywhere, running up and down the aisles and up and down the escalators, screaming their heads off, and crowding around Rapunzel's tower, gawking up at the row of little windows. One of the windows opens, and inside it there's a ballerina. She twirls around, and the little window closes, and another one opens. This one has a mouse in it. A black cat rears up behind it with its mouth open and the mouse leans out the window and squeaks, "Help, help!" The kids point and laugh.

And over the whole thing the Coppelius's Toyshop theme song plays, for the thousandth time:

"Come to Dr. Coppelius's
Where all is bright and warm,
And there's no fear
For I am here
To keep you safe from harm."

I am not supposed to be here. I am supposed to be at a Knicks game. I had a date to take Janine to see them play the Celtics this afternoon, and instead, here I am, stuck in a stupid toy store, because of a kid I didn't even know she had when I asked her out.

Women always make this big deal about men being liars and not telling them you're married, but what about them? They talk about honesty being the most important thing in a "relationship," which is their favorite word, and they let you take them out and spend a lot of money on them and when they finally let you talk them into going up to their apartment, they trot out these three little brats in pajamas and expect you to take them to the zoo.

This has happened to me about ten times, so before I asked Janine out, I asked Beverly, who works in Accounting with her, whether she lived alone. Beverly, who didn't tell me about *her* kid till we'd been going out over a month and who was really bent out of shape when I dumped her, said, yeah, Janine lived alone and she'd only been divorced about a year and was very "vulnerable" and the last thing she needed in her life was a jerk like me.

She must've given Janine the same line because I had to really turn on the old charm to get her to even talk to me and ask her out about fifteen times before she finally said yes.

So, anyway, the Knicks game is our third date. Bernard King is playing and I figure after the game I'm gonna get lucky, so I'm feeling pretty

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good, and I knock on her door, and this little kid answers it and says, "My mom's not ready."

I should've turned around right then and walked out. I could've scalped Janine's ticket for fifteen bucks, but she's already coming to the door, and she's wiping her eyes with a Kleenex and telling me to come in, this is Billy, she's so sorry she can't go to the game, this isn't her weekend to have the kid, but her ex-husband made her switch, and she's been trying to call me, but I'd already left.

I'm still standing in the hall. "You can't get tickets to Knicks games at the last minute," I say. "Do you know what scalpers charge?" She says, no, no, she doesn't expect me to get an extra ticket, and I breathe a sigh of relief, which I shouldn't have, because then she says she just got a call, her mom's in the hospital, she's had a heart attack, and she's got to go to Queens right away and see her, and she tried to get her ex on the phone but he's not there.

"You better not expect me to take the *kid* to the Knicks game!" I say, and she says, no, she doesn't, she's already called Beverly to watch him, and all she wants me to do is take the kid to meet her on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Fifty-eighth.

"I wouldn't ask you to do this if I had anybody else I could ask, but they said I needed to come . . ." she starts to cry again, ". . . right . . . away."

The whole time she's telling me this, she's been putting on her coat and putting the kid's coat on him and locking the door. "I'll say hi to Grandma for you," she says to the kid. She looks at me, her eyes all teary. "Beverly said she'll be there at noon. Be a good boy," she says to the kid, and is down the stairs and out the door before I can tell her no way.

So I'm stuck with taking this kid up to Fifth Avenue and Fifty-eighth, which is the corner Coppelius's Toyshop is on. Coppelius's is the biggest toy store in New York. It's got fancy red-and-gold doors, and two guys dressed up like toy soldiers standing on both sides of them, saluting people when they walk in, and a chick dressed like Little Red Riding Hood with a red cape and a basket passing out candy canes to everybody who walks by.

There's a whole mob of people and kids looking at the windows, which they decorate every Christmas with scenes from fairy tales. You know the kind, with Goldilocks eating a bowl of porridge, lifting a spoon to her mouth over and over, and stuffed bears that turn their heads and blink their eyes. It looks like half of New York is there, looking in the windows. Except for Beverly.

I look at my watch. It's twelve, and Beverly better get here soon or the kid can wait by himself.

The kid sees the windows and runs over to them. "Come back here!" I yell and grab him by the arm and yank him away from the windows. "Get over here!" I drag him over to the curb. "Now stand there."

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The kid is crying and wiping his nose, just like Janine. "Aunt Beverly said she was going to take me to look at the windows," he says.

"Well, then, *Aunt Beverly* can," I say, "when she finally gets here. Which better be pretty damn soon. I don't have all day to wait around."

"I'm cold," he says.

"Then zip up your coat," I say, and I zip up mine and stick my hands in my pockets. There's one of these real cold New York winds whipping around the corner, and it's starting to snow. I look at my watch. It's a quarter past twelve.

"I hafta go to the bathroom," the kid says.

I tell him to shut up, that he's not going anywhere, and he starts in crying again.

"And quit crying or I'll give you something to cry about," I say.

Right then Red Riding Hood comes over and hands the kid a candy cane. "What's the matter, honey?" she says.

The kid wipes his nose on his sleeve. "I'm cold and I hafta go to the bathroom," he says, and she says, "You just come with me to Coppelius's," and takes hold of his hand and takes him into the store before I can stop her.

"Hey!" I say and go after them, but the toy soldier guys are already shutting the doors behind them, and they go through their whole stiff-armed saluting routine before they open the doors again and I can get in.

When I finally do, I wish I hadn't. The place is a nightmare. There are about a million kids hollering and running around this huge room full of toys and people in costumes demonstrating things. A magician is juggling glow-in-the-dark balls and Raggedy Ann is passing out licorice sticks and a green-faced witch is buzzing the customers with a plane on a string. Around the edges of the room, trains are running on tracks built into the walls, hooting and whistling and blowing steam.

In the middle of this mess is a round purple tower, at least two stories high. There's a window at the very top and a mechanical Rapunzel is leaning out of it, combing her blonde hair, which hangs all the way to the bottom of the tower. Underneath Rapunzel's window there's a row of little windows that open and close, one after the other, and different things poke out, a baby doll and a white rabbit and a spaceship. All of them do something when their window opens. The doll says, "Ma-ma," the rabbit pulls out a pocketwatch and looks at it, shaking his head, the spaceship blasts off.

A whole bunch of kids are standing around the tower, but Janine's kid isn't one of them, and I don't see him or Red Riding Hood anywhere. Along the back wall there's a bunch of escalators leading up and down to the other floors, but I don't see the kid on any of them and I don't see any signs that say "Bathrooms," and the lines for the cash registers are too long to ask one of the clerks.

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A chick dressed up like Cinderella is standing in the middle of the aisle, winding up green toy frogs and setting them down on the floor to hop all over and get in everybody's way.

"Where are your toilets?" I say, but she doesn't hear me, and no wonder. Screaming kids and hooting trains and toy guns that go rat-a-tat-tat, and over the whole thing a sing-songy tune is playing full blast:

"I am Dr. Coppelius.
Welcome to my shop.
Where we have toys
For girls and boys,
And the fun times never stop."

It's sung in a croaky, old man's voice and after the second verse finishes, the first one starts in again, over and over and over.

"How do you stand that godawful noise?" I shout to Cinderella, but she's talking to a little kid in a snowsuit and ignores me.

I look around for somebody else I can ask and just then I catch sight of a red cape at the top of one of the escalators and take off after it.

I'm about to step on when an old guy dressed in a long red coat and a gray ponytail wig moves in front of me and blocks my way. "Welcome to Coppelius's Toyshop," he says in a phony accent. "I am Dr. Coppelius, the children's friend." He does this stupid bow. "Here in Coppelius's, children are our first concern. How may I assist you?"

"You can get the hell out of my way," I say and shove past him and get on the escalator.

The red cape has disappeared by now, and the escalator's jammed with kids. Half of them are hanging over the moving handrail, looking at the stuffed animals along the sides, teddy bears and giraffes and a life-size black velvet panther. It's got a pink silk tongue and real-looking teeth with a price tag hanging from one of its fangs. "One of a kind," the price tag says. Four thousand bucks.

When I get to the top of the escalator, I can't see Janine's kid or Red Riding Hood anywhere, but there's a red-and-gold signpost with arrows pointing off in all directions that say, "To Hot Wheels Country" and "To Babyland" and "To the Teddy Bears' Picnic." One of them says "To the Restrooms" and points off to the left.

I go the way the sign says, but the place is a maze, with aisles leading off in all directions and kids jamming every aisle. I go through fire engines and chemistry sets and end up in a big room full of *Star Wars* stuff, blasters and swords that light up and space fighters. But no signposts.

I ask a gold-colored robot for directions, feeling like an idiot, and he says, "Go down this aisle and turn left. That will bring you to Building Blocks. Turn left at the Tinker Toys and left again. The restrooms are right next to the Lego display."

I go down the aisle and turn left, but it doesn't bring me to Building

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Blocks. It brings me to the doll department and then the stuffed animals, more giraffes and bunnies and elephants, and every size teddy bear you've ever seen.

Holding onto one of them is a toddler bawling its head off. The kid's been eating candy, and the tears are running down into the chocolate for a nice sticky mess.

It's wailing, "I'm lost," and as soon as it sees me, it lets go of the teddy bear and heads straight for me with its sticky hands. "I can't find my mommy," it says.

The last thing I need is chocolate all over my pants. "You shoulda stayed with your mommy, then," I say, "instead of running off," and head back into the doll department, and old Coppelius must've been lying about the panther, because there, right in the middle of the Barbie dolls, is another one, staring at me with its yellow glass eyes.

I head back through the dollhouses and end up in tricycles, and this is getting me nowhere. I could wander around this place forever and never find Janine's kid. And it's already one o'clock. If I don't leave by one-thirty, I'll miss the start of the game. I'd leave right now, but Janine would be steamed and I'd lose any chance I had of getting her in the sack on one of those weekends when her ex has the kid.

But I'm not going to find him wandering around like this. I need to go back down to the main room and wait for Red Riding Hood to bring him back.

I find a down escalator in the sled department and get on it, but when I get off, it's not the main floor. I'm in Babyland with the baby buggies and yellow rubber ducks and more teddy bears.

I must not have gone down far enough. "Where's the escalator?" I say to a chick dressed like Little Bo Peep. She's kootchy-cooing a baby, and I have to ask her again. "Where's the down escalator?"

Bo-peep looks up and frowns. "Down?"

"Yeah," I say, getting mad. "Down. An escalator."

Still nothing.

"I want to get the hell out of this place!"

She makes a move toward the baby, like she's going to cover its ears or something and says, "Go down past the playpens and turn left. It's at the end of Riding Toys."

I do what she says, but when I get there, it goes up, not down. I decide to take it anyway and go back up to the tricycles and find the right escalator myself, but Babyland must be in the basement because at the top is the main room.

The place is even crazier and more crowded than it was before. A clown's demonstrating bright orange yo-yos, Humpty Dumpty's winding up toy dinosaurs, and there are so many kids and baby buggies and shopping bags it takes me fifteen minutes to make it over to Rapunzel's tower.

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There's no sign of Red Riding Hood and the kid or Beverly, but I can see the door from here and all the escalators. Dr. Coppelius is standing over at the foot of them, bowing to people and passing out big red suckers.

The kids around the tower shout and point, and I look up. A puppet with a hooked nose and a pointy hat is leaning out of one of the windows. He's holding a stick between his puppet hands, and he waves it around. The kids laugh.

The window shuts and another one opens. The ballerina twirls. The black cat, with teeth as sharp as a panther's, rears up behind the mouse, and the mouse squeaks, "Help, help!" Rapunzel combs her hair. And over it all, in time to the squeaking and the twirling and the combing, the song plays again and again:

". . . For girls and boys.
And the fun times never stop,"

and after five minutes of standing there, the whole thing is stuck in my head.

I look at my watch. It's one-fifteen. How the hell long does it take to take a kid to the bathroom?

The first verse finishes and the second one starts in:

"Come to Dr. Coppelius's,
Where all is bright and warm . . ."

I'm going to go crazy if I have to stand here and listen to this garbage much longer, and where the hell is Beverly?

I look at my watch again. It's one-thirty. I'm going to give it five more minutes and then take one more look around, and then I'm going to the game, kid or no kid.

Somebody yanks on my coat. "Well, it's about time," I say. "Where the hell have you been?" I look down.

It's a kid with dishwater-blonde hair and glasses. "When will he come and get her?" she says.

"Get who?" I say. She pushes the glasses up on her nose. "Rapunzel in her tower. When will the prince come and get her down?"

I stoop down and get real close. "Never," I say.

The kid blinks at me through her glasses. "Never?" she says.

"He got sick of waiting around for her," I say. "He waited and waited, and finally he got fed up and went off and left her there."

"All alone?" she squeaks, just like the mouse.

"All alone. Forever and ever."

"Doesn't she ever get out of the tower?"

"She's not going anywhere, and it serves her right. It's her own fault."

The kid backs away and looks like she's going to bawl, but she doesn't. She just looks at me through her glasses and then looks up at the tower.

The rabbit looks at his watch. A dragon breathes orange tin-foil flames. The baby doll goes, "Ma-ma." The sing-songy tune bellows, *"To keep you*

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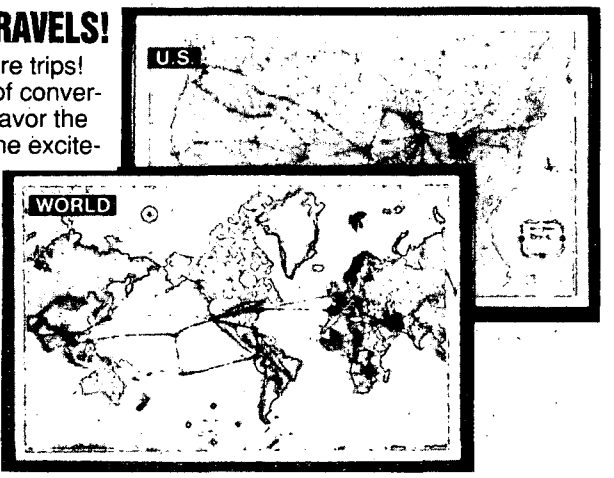

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safe from harm," and starts over, *"I am Dr. Coppelius,"* and I shove my way over to where he's standing at the foot of the escalators.

"How do I find a lost kid?" I say to Dr. Coppelius.

"Up this escalator to Painter's Corner," he says in his phony accent. "Turn right at the modeling clay display and go all the way to the end." He puts his hand on my arm. "And don't worry. He's perfectly safe. No child ever comes to harm in Coppelius's Toyshop."

"Yeah, well, I know one who's going to when I finally find him," I say and get on the escalator.

I thought it was the same one I went up before, but it's not. There's no panther, and no signpost at the top, but I can see paints and crayons down one of the halls, and I head that way. Halfway there, the aisle's blocked with kids and mothers pushing strollers.

"What the hell's this?" I say to a guy dressed up like an elf.

"It's the line for Santa Claus," he says. "You'll have to go around. Halfway down that aisle to the basketballs and turn left."

So I go down, but there aren't any basketballs, there's a big Atari sign and a bunch of kids playing Pac-Man, and when I turn left, I run into a room full of toy tanks and bazookas. I go back and turn left and run smack into the Santa Claus line again.

I look at my watch. It's a quarter past two. The hell with this. I've already missed the start of the game, and I'm not going to miss the rest of it. Beverly can try and find the kid, if and when she ever gets here. I'm leaving.

I squeeze through the line to the nearest escalator and take it down, but I must have gotten up on the third floor somehow because here's the *Star Wars* stuff. I find an escalator and go down, but when I get to the bottom, I'm back in Babyland and now I have to take the escalator up. But at least I know where it is. I go down past the playpens and over to Riding Toys, and sure enough, there's the escalator. I start to get on it.

The panther is standing at the bottom of the escalator, the price tag dangling from his sharp teeth.

I change my mind and go back through the riding toys and turn left, and now I'm back in dolls, which can't be right. I backtrack to the playpens, but now I can't find them either. I'm in Puzzles and Games.

I look around for somebody to ask, but there aren't any clerks or Mother Gooses around, and no kids either. They must all be in line to see Santa Claus. I decide to go back to the doll department and get my bearings and I go up the jigsaw puzzle aisle, but I can't seem to find a way out, and I am getting kind of worried when I see Dr. Coppelius.

He walks past the Candyland display and into a door in the wall between Jeopardy and Sorry! and I catch a glimpse of gray walls and metal stairs. I figure it must be an employee stairway.

I wait a few minutes so Dr. Coppelius won't see me and then open the

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door. It's an employee stairway, all right. There are stacks of boxes and wooden crates piled against the wall and on the stairs there's a big sign headed "Store Policy." I look up the metal stairway, and it has to lead up to the main floor because I can hear the sound of the song jangling far above:

". . . For girls and boys,
And the fun times never stop."

I shut the door behind me, and start up the stairs. It's dark with the door shut, and it gets darker as I climb, and narrower, but the song is getting steadily louder. I keep climbing, wondering what kind of stairway this is. It can't be for bringing up stock because it keeps making all these turns, and when I decide I'd better turn around and go back down, somebody's locked the door at the bottom, so I have to keep climbing up, and it keeps getting narrower and narrower and darker and darker till I can feel the walls on both sides and the last few steps I practically have to squeeze through, but I can see the door up ahead, there's light all around the edges, and the song is getting really loud.

"Come to Dr. Coppelius's,
Where all is bright and warm . . ."

I squeeze up the last few steps and open the door, only it isn't a door. It's one of the little windows the mouse and the ballerina and the white rabbit come out of, and I have somehow gotten inside of Rapunzel's tower. This must be the stairs they use to come fix the mechanical toys when they break down.

Kids are looking up, and when I open the window, they point and laugh like I was one of the toys. I shut the window and squeeze back down the stairs. I break a piece of wood off one of the crates on the stairs to use to pry the door open, but I must have made a wrong turn somewhere because I end up back in the same place. I open the door and yell, "Hey! Get me out of here!" but nobody pays any attention.

I look around, trying to spot Red Riding Hood or the robot or Dr. Coppelius to come help me, and I see Beverly going out the front door. She's got Janine's kid, and he is wiping his nose on his sleeve and clutching a red sucker. Beverly squats down and wipes his eyes with a Kleenex. She zips up his coat, and they start out the door, which a toy soldier is holding open for them.

"Wait!" I shout, waving the piece of wood to get their attention, and the kids point and laugh.

I am going to have to climb out the window and down the side of the tower, hanging onto Rapunzel's hair. I put my foot up over the windowsill. It's a tight squeeze to get my leg up onto the sill, but I manage to do it, and when I get out of here, I know a little boy with a sucker who's really going to have something to cry about. I hitch my leg over and start to hoist my other foot up over the sill.

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I look down. The panther is sitting at the foot of the tower, crouched and waiting. He licks his velvet chops with his pink silk tongue. His sharp teeth glitter.

So here I am, stuck in Coppelius's Toyshop, for what seems like forever, with kids screaming and running around and trains whistling and that stupid song playing over and over and over,

"I am Dr. Coppelius.
Welcome to my shop . . ."

I take out my watch and look at it. It says five to twelve. I've kind of lost track of how long I've been stuck here. It can't be more than two days, because on Monday Janine or Beverly or one of the chicks at work will notice I'm not there, and they'll figure out this is the last place anybody saw me. But it seems longer, and I am getting kind of worried.

Every time the window opens there seem to be different toys, fancy games you play on computers and cars that run by remote control and funny-looking roller skates. And the people demonstrating them and handing out candy canes are different, too, mermaids and turtles wearing headbands and a hunchback in a jester's hat and a purple cape.

And the last time I looked out, a woman with dishwater blonde hair and glasses was standing under the tower looking up at me. "When I was little," she said to the guy she was with, "I hated this place. I was so worried about Rapunzel."

She pushed her glasses up on her nose. "I didn't know she was a toy. I thought she was real, and I thought the prince had just gone off and abandoned her. I thought he'd gotten fed up and gone off and left her there. All alone."

She said it to the guy, but she was looking straight at me. "Forever and ever. And it served her right. It was her own fault."

But there are lots of people who wear glasses, and even if Janine's mother died and she had to go to the funeral, she'd still be back at work by Wednesday.

I look over at the exit. The toy soldiers are still there, saluting, on either side of the door, and in between them Dr. Coppelius smiles and bows. Overhead the song screeches:

"And there's no fear
For I am here
To keep you safe from harm."

And starts in on the first verse again.

I take out my watch and look at it, and then I shut the window and go look for a way out, but I get confused on the stairs and make a wrong turn and end up in the same place. The little window opens, and I lean out. "Help! Help!" I shout.

The kids point and laugh. ●

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

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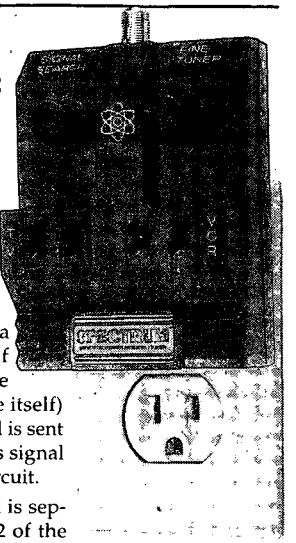

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The signal is separated into 12 of the best antenna configurations. These signals route themselves into 12 separate circuits. The *Signal Switch* control gathers 12 of the best antenna configurations. Use the *Signal Search* control to select from the best signal. The *Fine Tuner* circuit gives your TV crisp, clear reception.

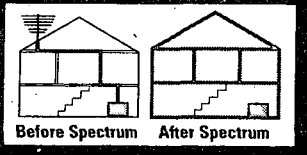
Try it risk-free. The Spectrum Universal Antenna/Tuner comes with our risk-free trial and a 90-day manufacturer's warranty. If you're not satisfied, return it for a "No Questions Asked" refund.

The Spectrum Antenna will improve television reception, even on local stations, for:

- *Cable users*
- *Non-cable users*
- *Satellite users*

Why Spectrum is the best...

- When TV signals are tuned at the TV channel's center frequency, optimum tuning has been achieved.
- Other antennas can't offer center frequency tuning like the Spectrum Antenna can. They only offer such tuning up to the edge of the center frequency. As a result, your TV picture remains snowy.



How does Spectrum use electrical wiring as an antenna? Believe it or not, Spectrum simply "activates" the giant antenna that already exists in your home. Essentially, it uses all of the wiring throughout your home's walls and ceilings to make an antenna as large as your house for unbelievably clear reception of local broadcasting.

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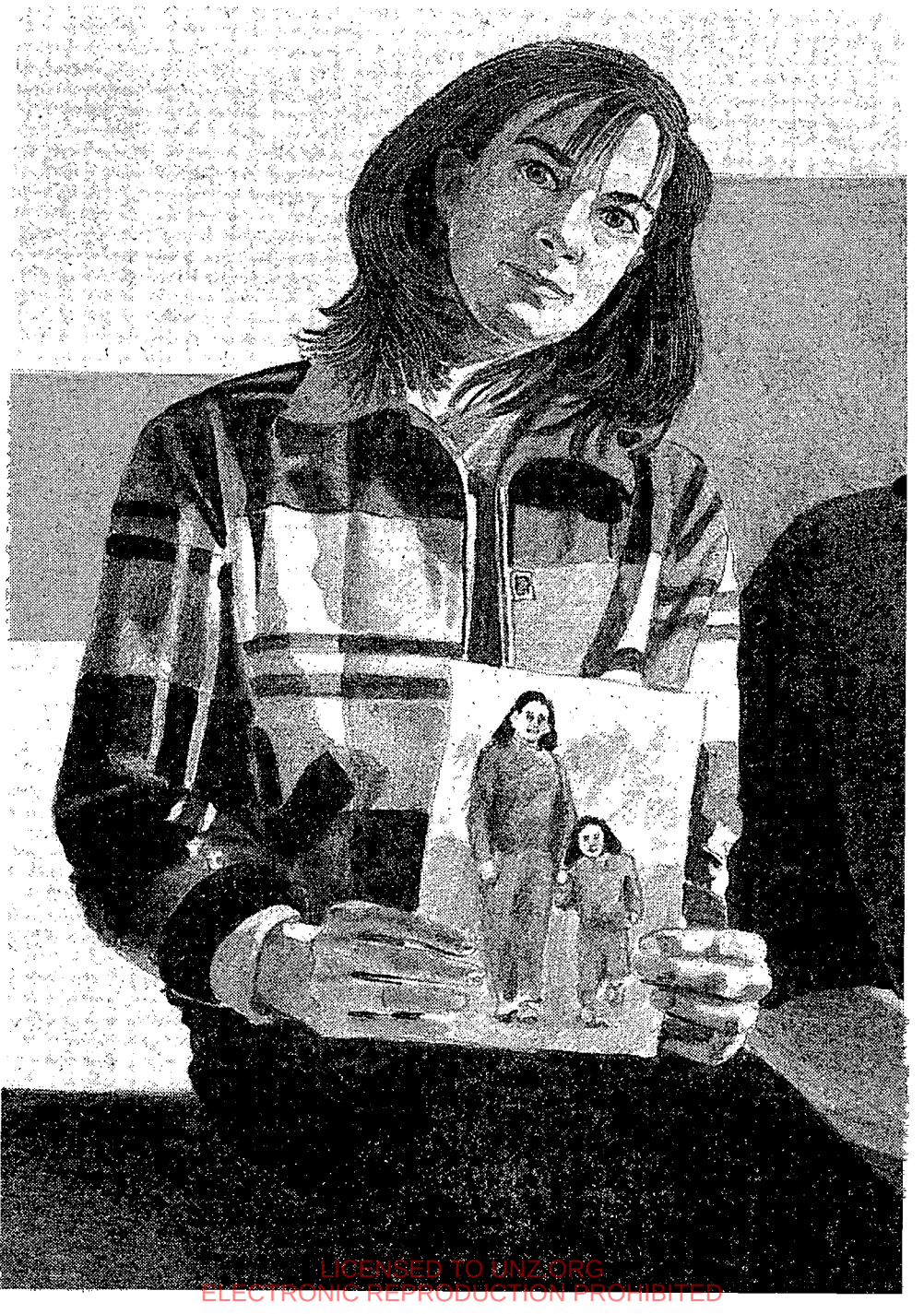

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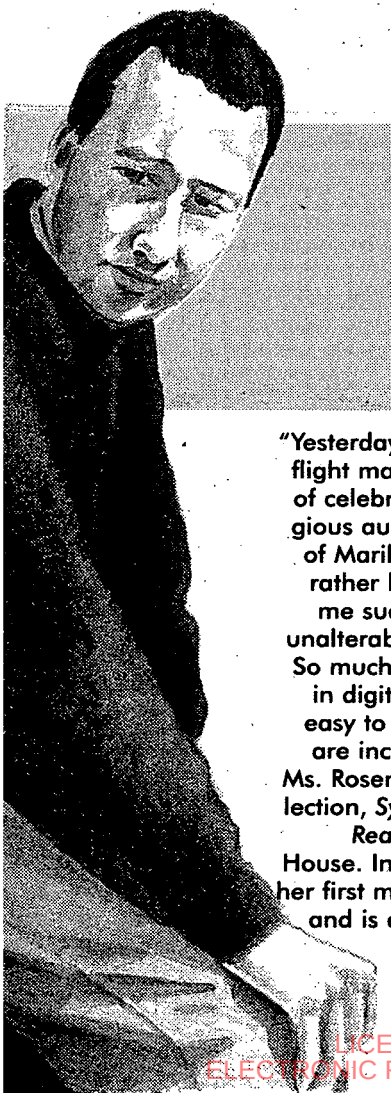
Mary Rosenblum

YESTERDAYS



"Yesterdays" was inspired by an in-flight magazine article on the sale of celebrity photographs at prestigious auction houses. "A snapshot of Marilyn Monroe had fetched a rather large sum of money. It hit me suddenly just how rare such unalterable records are becoming. So much of our lives are captured in digital form—records that are easy to delete or alter. Our pasts are increasingly more mutable." Ms. Rosenblum's hardcover SF collection, *Synthesis and Other Virtual Realities,* is out from Arkham House. In addition, she's turned in her first mainstream mystery novel, and is at work on a second one.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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The call comes in over the dashboard terminal. I'm driving this rented florist van, peeling down a freeway off-ramp, and the winking eye—my icon for seriously urgent E-mail—nearly sends me off the road. I'm on a hot tip. Only a fistful of people can get through to me right now and I can't think of one good reason for any of them to be yelling at me.

I can think of a few bad reasons. I negotiate the lunch-hour mess at the intersection, and turn right on the main drag. The eye winks demandingly. Well, I'm hurrying, but this is lunch-rush and the delivery-dudes are all kamikazes, putting life on the line to shave a few seconds off their guaranteed time. The proximity sensors shrill. I crank the wheel hard, manage to miss a careening silver hot-truck. *Pho's Beef-Noodle Soup* the ornate letters proclaim. *Ten Minute Delivery Anywhere.* I decide against Vietnamese food for lunch.

I'm coming up fast on my turn-off. The aging van groans as I cut off a rib-joint truck and pull a fast right. The delivery-dude calls me a bastard over her speaker. I figure I just cost her a solid five seconds on her time, so we're even. I hit the brakes and park under a sorry-looking maple. Taking a deep breath, anticipating trouble, I touch the E-mail icon.

"Hey, you're *slow,* man." This girl is staring at me from the screen. She's even more Semitic looking than me, and I look more like an Arab than a Jew, thanks to Mother's Israeli blood. She's got an accent, and I don't know her.

"How did you get this access?" I'm seriously pissed. "Tell me now or get out."

"I hacked you, stupid. I wanted a look at you, but you're not on a visual access." She looks annoyed, as if *I'd* inconvenienced *her.* "How 'bout Ramiken's at four? Look for me."

"Like hell." I've just ended a long messy relationship and I'm not looking for another yet, thank you. And I'm sure not interested in this snotty kid. "You're underage. Cruise elsewhere."

"You wish!" Her lip curls. "Don't you want to meet your long-lost little sister?" She cocks her head and grins. "Hi, big brother."

"I don't have a sister." This is to laugh. "Bad research, honey. Better luck next time."

"Yes, you do." Her grin widens. "Didn't Daddy tell you? That Mom was preggers when he kicked her out?"

"No way." I stab at the exit icon. "And *she* left."

"Four, at Ramiken's!" She beats me to the exit, and the screen blanks.

Hacker's joke, I decide. People get their kicks in weird ways, on the Net. I put the van into gear again and trundle on down the street. Yellow leaves have matted into soggy piles along the curbs. Upscale houses sulk behind serious fences. I sympathize. I feel like this brat has been rummaging though my dresser drawers. Who told her she could hack around

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in my past? Mother walked out of my life twenty years ago. Over and done with.

I check the van's map screen, realize I'm almost there. Time to shake my mood fast. You don't do a good sales pitch if you're pissed. Practicing my smile, I turn into the entrance of the walled suburban enclave. It has a live guard at the gate. Irene, my best informant, gave me this tip. She works for a cleaning service that specializes in attics, basements, and storage buildings—big jobs like that. She has a good eye for real stuff, and she can smell a fake a mile away. I've never been burned by a scam from one of her tips.

In the gatehouse, the security guard is glued to a handheld comix screen. Super mutants dressed in primary colors are punching each other to a hardrock beat, but he finally looks up. He's twenty. Maybe. Somebody's son—inheriting the cushy family job. "Bet the good guys are winning." I give him a delivery-dude lip curl and zip my ID card through the slot beneath his little window.

That card is legit, rented along with the van. The kid looks once at his ID screen, shrugs, and waves me through. He's back to his comix before I clear the gate. I cruise down the street reading numbers. This enclave is white, late-middle-age, and median socio-economic. The style is Classic Suburban—Classic Nostalgia, I call it—and I roll my eyes at the green lawns and neat flowerbeds. They're fakes. The income bracket here isn't high enough to pay for irrigation permits.

I pull into the driveway of Irene's tip. "Addison's Flowers and Holographic Displays," I answer the House system's automatic query. "With a delivery for Roberta Ingram."

There is a long silence, then a harsh female voice comes in over the dash speaker. "Who are they from?" She's doing a fake Brit accent. Brit accents are in right now.

"I'm sorry, ma'am." I put on my suave customer-service voice. "The envelope is sealed. I'd lose my job if I opened it."

There is another long silence. Enclavers are really suspicious, even though they live in about the safest housing possible outside the urban center. I wait for curiosity to win out over paranoia. The florist routine almost always works. It's the sealed card. We primates are a curious species.

"All right." She gives in, right on schedule. "Bring it in, please."

The front door locks click as I take the huge arrangement from the back of the van. She lets me in herself as I lug the armload of fresh flowers up the steps. The sheer size and expense of the arrangement disarms her last suspicions.

"It's lovely." Her hands flutter like pale birds. "Put it on the table there." She forgets to do the accent. "Where's the card?"

I set the flowers down on an ugly hall table made from real wood with a beautiful grain. What a waste. As I hand her the card, I'm taking a quick

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inventory—matching furniture, nice carpet, clean pastel walls. Looks like a virtual display in an on-line showroom. No dust, no clutter. Three formal and unimaginative holos of what are probably family members on the mantlepiece. Good. She doesn't care that much about mementos.

"What's this?" She looks up from the card, suspicion surfacing on her face. "This is a non-solicitation enclave!"

"A gift for you," I quote the card. This is the critical minute where I sell her or get arrested for illegal solicitation. "From me to you, for listening for five minutes to a business proposition. If you say no, I leave. The flowers are yours." I give her my warmest smile.

"What do you want?" She's poised to yell for security.

"I'm a free-lance art broker. I understand that you're related to the late Senator Mayer." I make him sound big-time, although his only real claim to fame was that he happened to be standing too close to the VP when a terrorist tossed a grenade his way. "I wonder if you have any . . . uh . . . family memorabilia tucked away. You know—photos, videos, anything like that?" I do hopeful and ingenuous. "There's quite a market for pre-digital artifacts, you know." Primed by Irene, she should be seeing dollar-signs about now.

"I . . . might have something." She does her best to look nonchalant. "I . . . I was just thinking about the old videos last week."

Bless you, Irene. She just earned her 15 percent.

"Why did you have to do this?" She waves at the massive arrangement, curious. "Why not just call me and ask?"

"At least three other free-lancers are hacking my access." Those are the ones I know about. Not even Sotheby-Online is above pirating a hot tip, for all their snooty airs. There's just too much money in pre-digitals. "This is the only way I can be sure of speaking to you privately."

"I was reading about the latest sale at Sotheby's." She's hooked—not quite rubbing her hands together but almost. "A video of some singer went for a half-million International."

"Well, the singer was Edward Kowalczyk, one of the hottest rock stars of his time. And the video was non-commercial—a one-only jam session at some party." I spread my hands, looking modest and a little rueful. "I wish everything brought that kind of price. I could retire. Maybe you can give me an idea of what you have."

I know what she has, more or less. Irene is good at finding out what kinds of memorabilia have been forgotten in the rented storage locker or the basement. I wonder if her role as Housekeeper isn't part of her disarming charm. Mother figure. Nurturer. Someone to be confided in. Sometimes the clients even send her a cash tip—for alerting them to the gold hiding in those old photo albums and video cassettes. And for putting them in touch with an honest broker. I am honest. Anyway, she finally brings them out—several black plastic cartridges of antique video

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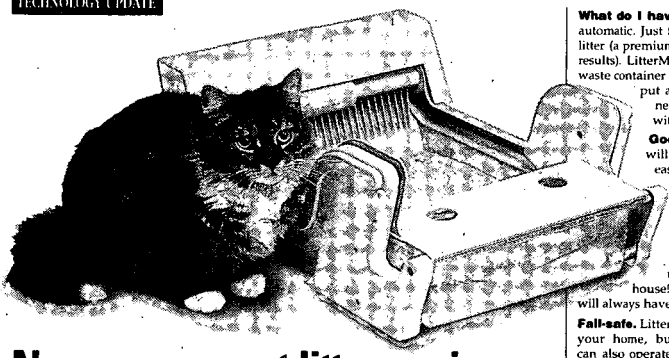


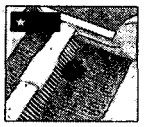
Never scoop cat litter again... Computer technology creates the only self-cleaning litter box!

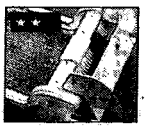
You and your cat will love the way LitterMaid eliminates the hassle, mess and odor of the ordinary litter box.

by Shirley Liberles

Computer technology revolutionizes the litter box...

LitterMaid, a patented product from Waters Research Company, is a completely self-cleaning litter box operated by a microprocessor, but your cat uses it just like a normal litter box. Approximately 10 minutes after LitterMaid's "electric eye" senses that your cat has exited the litter box, it signals the start-up of the automatic sifting comb. ★ The comb sifts through the litter, scooping up any waste. ★★ The waste is deposited into a sealed, air-tight waste container and the comb returns to its original position, smoothing the litter. The system resets, ready to repeat its cycle the next time your cat uses the litter box. ★★★ When the waste container is full, you can either throw it away and put a new one in its place or empty it and reuse it for up to one year!





House cats. Large or small, affectionate or independent, young or old, long-haired or short, they all create the same dilemma for their owners—the litter box.

There are few things I can think of that are as foul as cleaning the litter box at my house. Even when I clean it daily, it's difficult to keep odor away. And this problem is multiplied because I have two cats! But because I love them, and that's virtually all the maintenance they require, I do it...because there's no other option.

Well, today there's a solution that cat owners across the country will be thrilled about. LitterMaid, manufactured by Waters Research, is destined to make ordinary litter boxes obsolete!

Automatic cleaning. LitterMaid is a computerized, completely self-cleaning litter box. Its operation is controlled by a microprocessor. An electric eye senses when the cat has exited the litter box, and minutes later, it signals the start-up of the automatic sifting comb. The comb sifts through the litter, scoops up any waste, and deposits it into a sealed, air-tight disposable waste container. The comb then returns to its original position, smoothing the litter. LitterMaid is now ready to begin another cycle as soon as necessary.

Revolutionary. LitterMaid may permanently change the face of the cat-product industry. Cat owners will never again have to endure the unsanitary and odor-filled chore of cleaning their cat's litter box. Plus, there will be no more embarrassing litter-box odor in your home, because the disposable waste container is sealed and totally air-tight!

What do I have to do? LitterMaid is fully automatic. Just fill the pan with *clumping* cat litter (a premium brand will provide the best results). LitterMaid does the rest! When the waste container is full, just throw it away and put a new one in its place. You'll never have unsanitary contact with cat waste again!

Good for your cat. Not only will LitterMaid make *your* life easier, it will make the litter box a nicer place for your cat. Most cats dislike using litter boxes that are dirty, and that can lead to them not going to the bathroom. Or worse, they may choose to use the bathroom around the house! With LitterMaid, your cat will always have a healthy, clean litter box.

Fail-safe. LitterMaid plugs into any outlet in your home, but it can also operate on eight "D" batteries. So even in the event of a power failure, LitterMaid will continue cleaning. It is equipped with an alarm that alerts you when the batteries are running low.

Put it anywhere. LitterMaid is only a couple inches longer and taller than conventional cat litter boxes. It should fit easily where your litter box is now—and you should put it there at first, until your cat gets used to it. But later, because LitterMaid is odorless and sanitary, you have the opportunity to place it virtually anywhere in your home—without any ordinary litter-box worries!

LitterMaid eliminates...

- *Embarrassing litter-box odors*
- *Having to endure the unsanitary and odor-filled chore of cleaning your cat's litter box*
- *Limiting the areas within your home in which you can place the litter box*
- *Worrying about how to clean the litter box if you go on vacation*
- *Having a cat who refuses to use the litter box because it's dirty*
- *Some risk of catching a disease from the cat's waste—this is especially important for pregnant women and people with immune deficiencies*

Try it risk-free. LitterMaid is backed by our exclusive risk-free home trial. Try it, and if you're not completely satisfied, return it within 90 days for a full refund, "No Questions Asked." It's also backed by a one-year manufacturer's limited warranty.

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film. I slot the first one into my viewer. She doesn't have a machine in the place that could handle them, would probably have tossed them out if she'd discovered them pre-Irene.

"Grandma took them. Grandma McCarty—my mother's mother. I never did clean out her storage locker after she died."

The tapes have faded so badly that there's nothing left to see but shadows. She's slumping with disappointment by the time I slot the last one, and so am I.

Bingo.

We peer at the small screen together as an inexpert photographer gives us a wobbly view of kids flinging a Frisbee and making faces at the camera. One kid catches my eye. He's dark haired and slender, unlike the red heads and blondes around him—with a face as Semitic as mine. He's watching the kids toss the neon green Frisbee with this kind of distant, not-quite-wistful look. Like he's watching a video, *too*. Then he looks over his shoulder at the camera, and smiles.

I have this sudden sense that he's smiling at *me*. And I remember standing in the shadow of the snack stand at our enclave pool, watching the other kids splash and shout, and I could no more join them than I could walk into that Mayer reunion and help myself to a chicken leg. I never really fit into Dad's life. Or maybe I just didn't try very hard to fit.

"Well." She's doing the accent again. "What do you think?"

I blink and tear my eyes away from the screen.

We dicker over price for awhile. She's actually pretty sharp—which makes me wonder for a minute if this isn't a scam. People do some really good fakes. It's a gamble, but I finally call up a contract—pending verification from a bonded lab, of course.

After the lab courier shows to pick up the film, I climb back into my rented van. The digital clock on the dash tells me I can still make Ramikin's by four.

Which I have no intention of doing. But I'm curious as to why she picked on *me*. As I thread my way through the pre-dinner lull in traffic, I find myself wondering about that kid—who he was and why he was standing and watching like that. And I suddenly realize that I'm on my way to Ramikin's. Hell, why not? I floor the accelerator and cut off a straggling pizza delivery truck, even though I'm not really in a rush.

Ramikin's is a lowlife burbs joint. There's no Security at the door and the people slouched at the counter or in the booths are a scruffy mix in their teens and twenties. Flea market artists, I figure. Small-time hackers and black-market dealers. I almost leave, but then I spot her in a booth along the far wall, her crossed arms fencing a shot glass on the table in front of her. She's grinning at me and it's a challenge.

"Joshua Davidson?" She tilts her head as I slide onto the bench across

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from her. "I lose. I bet myself that you wouldn't show. You go by Josh, or Joshua?" Her accent sounds real, but I can't place it.

"Joshua." I dump my jacket onto the seat beside me. A spray of plastic flowers in a cheap glass bud vase needs dusting. The place might be nostalgic and chic in the right neighborhood, but the scabby Formica tabletops and faded carpeting make it sleazy. I wave away the waiter who is trying to shove a menu at me.

"We want the smoked fish plate, Dingo." She's still giving me that dare-you grin. "You want anything to drink? It's all on me. If you're not into alcohol, then I recommend the water. I know the owner. It's from a real mountain spring, triple-filtered, and safe."

"Okay, water," I say to the waiter. He grunts, winks at her, and shuffles off toward the kitchen.

"You're not my sister." I prop my elbows on the table and give her a tolerant grin. "So what's the scam?"

She pulls a square of folded hardcopy from her pocket and shoves it at me. A dog-eared 2-D photo is clipped to it. The paper is a fax from the International Census Database—a form attesting to the recorded birth of Sabra Perez, daughter of one Deborah Perez, father unlisted, in the Sharonne Hospital in a town named Suhayiah in New Palestine. I look at the date and count back, finding landmarks in birthdays—those once-a-year events when Dad would take the whole day off and Do Something with me. They stick up like rocks from the muddy river of boarding school memories—navigational aids in a murky flood.

Sabra Perez was born eight months after Mother left for Israel. Which makes her nineteen to my twenty-eight. The photo is of my mother. She's holding a little kid by the hand. The resolution is too shitty for me to be sure it's Sabra. I drop picture and fax onto the table as the waiter sets a platter down between us. Translucent rolls of smoked fish have been arranged like a bouquet of flowers on a bed of rice balls. The artistry seems out of place here. "It's very hard to get my private access." I reach for the dewy glass that the waiter has set down in front of me. "You're pretty good in the Net."

"Yeah, she is." The waiter snickers under his breath. "Anything else, Sabra?"

She shakes her head at him and he leaves. "I am good. I can save you a lot on hired research."

I get it—this is a pitch. I smile, unexpectedly relieved. Reaching for a rosy sliver of tuna, I wrap it around a rice ball. "You blew it, honey." The fish is good, and my stomach reminds me that I never bothered with lunch. "If you had just come to me asking for a job, I might have given you a tryout." I wrap more fish around rice. "Your 'I'm family' act pissed me off." I push the folded hardcopy at her. "If you're as good as you say you are, then maybe you hacked the Census Database."

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"I could have," she says softly. "But I didn't." She props her chin on her hand, her eyes on my face. "I could use a job, but like I said, I mostly wanted to see you. You look like Mom, you know."

The way she says "Mom" irritates me. "I got to get back to work." I slide out of the booth. "Go hack someone else."

She doesn't say anything. I tap the waiter on the shoulder on my way out, shove a cash card at him. "It's on me," I tell him. There's enough on it to cover the food and a tip. No way I charge anything to my personal account in a hacker hangout.

He comes running after me as I unlock the van, shoves my jacket at me. "You forgot this. You're stupid, mister." His lip curls. "She's one of the best."

"Yeah. Well. Thanks for the jacket." I clamber into the van and slam the door on his retreating shrug. I'm pissed at myself for botching my dramatic exit. Something rustles in the pocket as I toss the jacket across the seat. I shove my hand into it, pull out the photo and birth certificate. A net address is scribbled in one corner. I crumple it up, aiming at the van's little waste chute.

Mother came to visit me twice after she left us. It was years after—I was twelve or thirteen—but Dad was still pissed. The breakup had been truly ugly. I don't remember much from those visits. My childhood got lost in a static of shouting, anger, breaking dishes, and tears. I do remember that she took me to the zoo. We looked at the lions lounging below us in their artificial veldt. Then we put on VR goggles and went in with them. I still remember the lazy, low-slung grace of the big cats. On the second visit, we went to a water park. I loved the big slide, but Dad blew up after that one. You can catch some nasty viruses in those parks. That was her last visit.

And suddenly . . . I remember this kid. We had to stop at a daycare center to pick her up. I can't remember her name, or what she looked like even—just that I was mad because this was *my* trip to the zoo with Mother, and we had to drag this toddler along. Maybe it was a friend's kid. I try to snag that memory, but like a piece of driftwood on a muddy river, it bobs once and sinks again.

I blink, and realize that I'm hanging onto the wheel so hard it hurts. Two guys strolling past are staring at me and snickering. I bare my teeth at them and they hurry on down the sidewalk. Memory is a personal interpretation of the past. Maybe that's why all those collectors lust for those immutable fragments of yesterday—the old photos and pre-digital videos that represent a hard instant of reality. Today, your official history is as unreliable as memory. No database is really secure. I flatten out the photo and stare at it.

It could be real.

Mother smiles into the camera, clutching the kid's hand. She could be

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Sabra. Maybe. She could be any dark-haired, Semitic kid. I don't need a sister. I start the van and hit the street. It's the start of the dinner-delivery rush, and I play bumper-cars with delivery-dudes all the way across town.

I get some immediate interest when I upload a few hints about the Mayer video into my online catalogue. The old boy was no Kennedy, but assassination—even accidental assassination—has its glamor. The video is worth some research time. The more names you can put to faces, the more a pre-digital is worth. I tell myself I don't have time to check into Deborah Perez's post-divorce life.

I put in three twelve-hour days chasing clues through newspaper society columns, church files (the Mayers were staunch Episcopalians), school records, ancient credit card and bank records, and court files. I have managed to positively ID nearly everyone in the video. I've hit the point of diminishing returns. The cost of the Net time needed to ID the rest of the faces won't be worth the relatively small increase in the video's value. I don't post the video in my catalogue, though. I tell myself that I just want to clean up a few loose ends.

It's a lie. I haven't been able to identify that kid with the outsider eyes, and I want to know who he is. I'm obsessing and I'm not sure why—maybe because he looks the way I felt, so much of the time. Standing on the sidelines of Dad's busy life as an electronic rights lawyer. But I can't find a single clue as to who he is. That night I dream that Mother takes me to the zoo. We put on the VR goggles, and walk onto the African veldt. There are no lions, but the child from the photo is curled up in the yellow grass, sleeping. "Meet your little sister," Mother says.

"No," I yell at her, backing away. "I don't have a sister." And suddenly the dark-haired boy from the video leaps from a clump of tall grass. He grabs up the girl and starts running.

"Catch him," my mother shrieks. "Oh God, Josh, please!"

I try, but I can only run in slow motion and I know I'll never catch him, and she'll never forgive me. I hear Mother crying, and I burn with guilt and anger.

I wake up drenched in sweat. Basic sibling resentment dream, I tell myself. I pad to my kitchen wall for a glass of water. Any cheap therapy-interactive would confirm it. I gulp my water, staring at the black rectangle of the cassette on the low table in front of the window. The moon is full, and pale light streams through the sealed polyglass, casting a rectangle of dark shadow across the wood. It occurs to me that maybe my subconscious thinks she's my sister. I walk over to my terminal, put on my goggles and gloves, and enter my virtual office. I've already uploaded a copy of the cassette, all cross-referenced to my documentation. It only takes a few minutes to post it into the catalogue. I don't need to know who that kid is. It's not important.

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But, instead of going back to bed, I get out that blurry photo and scan it into my system. The little girl looks like she's about three. That would make me twelve. I call up a stock image of myself, regress it to twelve. My boyish smirk reminds me of the kid in the video. I insert myself into the scene. Now I'm holding Mother's other hand. The background is an ugly concrete building. Could be anywhere. I tell my custom printer to give me black and white on gloss photo stock and a minute later the new photo emerges. I bend the corners, crumple it a little, the way the original is crumpled. Sabra and I smile at the camera as we grip Mother's hands. One big happy family.

It's so easy.

I start researching Deborah Perez's history.

Morning. I'm bleary after way too little sleep. I take the Mayer cassette over to get it vaulted by a licensed and bonded registration service. Prospective purchasers can come examine the original in a secure viewer that won't cause any more damage. It is hard to hand that cassette over to the polite man at the registration desk. Restless, I borrow his terminal, and run the segment I posted to my catalogue. The dark-haired kid seems to stare at me accusingly before he turns to watch that Frisbee sail past. I don't need him, I remind us both. I have enough solid names to bring a top price.

After that, I take a cab back to the apartment, intending to continue last night's research. My mother's life in the United States is pretty accessible. Born with dual US/Israeli citizenship, she lived in the States for only three years before she married my Dad. Their stormy separation generated a blizzard of legal and emotional fallout, which culminated in her losing custody of me after a vicious legal battle. She then moved to Tel Aviv and took a job with Global Community Online—a moderately sensational newsnet.

When the Syrian uprising sucked the Middle East into yet another bickering little war, she left Community Online. There the trail ended, although it was after that that she had come to visit me. Hell, *nobody* knows the history of the Middle East for sure anymore. So many databases have been hacked and rewritten for PR purposes so many times that all kinds of info has gotten lost. Or been added.

I realize I'm staring blankly out the cab window. She must have been quite the loner, to disappear so easily and with so little formal notice. I couldn't even find a missing persons report. I did find another copy of Sabra's birth record in the Sharonne Hospital database. A Tel Aviv hospital would have seemed more plausible if Sabra had been setting up a past, I tell myself. Maybe the Sharonne database was easier to hack. But if she had made her way into the International Census Database, my professed sister was good enough to take on any hospital database.

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Or else . . . she was real.

My immediate denial makes me realize just how much I am resisting that possibility. Jealousy? Dad spent his life in the Net, unraveling the eternal tangle of who owned which electron flow. Sometimes I wonder if his obsession wasn't an escape. Custody had been a metaphorical victory. Maybe parenting a young child was a little too real.

"Do you wish me to wait?" my auto-cab asks patiently. We're parked in front of my apartment, and I think it has asked me once already.

"No." I zip my card through the reader and get out, yawning. The landscape service is trimming shrubs and raking sand beds in the Japanese garden lobby. I take the elevator up to my floor, unlock the door, and freeze.

The place is a mess—clothes pulled out of my drawers, the folding sofa-bed open, mattress yanked off the frame, seams slashed, batting spilling like white guts onto the floor. The cabinets in my kitchen wall have been ransacked. Cookies, crackers, soup, micro-meals—the packages have all been opened. Lasagna sauce streaks the counter like drying blood.

I lean against the wall for a minute, a dull sense of resignation mingling with my anger. This isn't the first time, and it won't be the last. "House, get me Security." I'm tired and I sound it. "I've had a burglary."

While I wait for Security to show, I start to pick up. The security guard will probably yell at me for moving things, but this isn't a murder scene, and the cops will only file Security's E-mail report. They contract minor law enforcement to private security firms like ours. The management knows that I'm a burglary risk, but I'm only paying mid-level rent, so they won't ask the Security to waste much time on it. At least this time the burglars didn't vandalize the place.

It hits me suddenly that I'm mostly dreading the cleanup effort. I was at a party a few weeks ago where the host had just been robbed. He kept going on and on about how personally violated he felt—like he'd been raped. I don't feel violated as I pick up my scattered socks. And I wonder who is off-center—me or my violated ex-host?

Security finally shows at the door. She asks the usual questions, and takes the usual vids. She doesn't pretend that they're going to work too hard on this. As she's leaving, she pauses at the door and nods. "Whatever they were looking for was pretty small," she says. "Hardcopy? Datasphere? Something like that?"

"Huh-uh." I'm surprised. "I don't handle data. It's all pre-digital—videocassettes, old 8 mm films, photos." They could be after old flat photos, I figure, but the timing's too close to be coincidence. The burglary happened within hours of my posting the Mayer cassette.

She's stubborn. "Look at the places they searched—the trap in your sink, under the drawers, in soup packages. Funny place to look for a videocassette."

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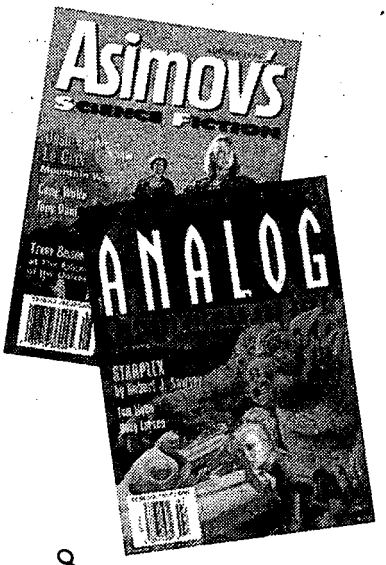

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She leaves and I go back to refolding my clothes. They were looking for anything they could steal, I tell myself. But they left a couple of cash cards on the floor with my socks. Granted, they barely contain a hundred International dollars between them, but still . . .

Now, I'm bothered.

Tossing the rest of my clothes into a drawer, I go back to my terminal. Digging the birth certificate fax from my jacket pocket, I access the scribbled address.

She answers in realtime—*someone* does, anyway. I stare at the feline-faced woman with purple hair. I hate VR fads.

"Well, hi there." She sounds breathless, as if she's been running, but she bares white fangs in that familiar grin. "Changed your mind about the job?"

"No," I say shortly. "But . . . I'd like to ask you some questions. About . . . my mother."

"*Our* mother." The cat-grin widens. "Twenty questions, huh? Sure, why not. I still owe you lunch. Ramikin's in half an hour." And she exits.

I pull off my goggles and gloves, half-tempted not to show. But if the burglary came right after I posted the Mayer cassette, it also came right after she dropped herself into my life. I finish picking up the rest of my clothes before I go down to get a cab. So I'm late to Ramikin's.

"She's out back," the waiter Dingo tells me when I arrive. He doesn't like me. Too bad.

I follow his nod, find myself in a little back alley behind the restaurant. Boxes built of scrap fiberboard hold struggling shrubs that hide the view of barred back entrances and dumpsters. Sort of. Three rusty metal tables are empty except for her. "Drinking already?" I ask as I sit down across from her.

"You bet." She laughs and lifts the shot glass, tilting it so that the thick amber liquid beads the rim. "Mix a few precursors to some important neurotransmitters, a couple of herbs, and you can really rip in the Net. Totally legal. Cheers." She lifts the glass in a mocking salute as the waiter plunks a glass of ice water down in front of me.

"Whatever."

"You sound sour." She lifts one eyebrow as I sip my water.

"Somebody busted into my apartment."

"Oh, no." She widens her eyes sympathetically. "What did you lose?"

There is something odd about her tone. "Nothing gone as far as I can tell." I shrug. "The item they were after was already elsewhere."

"Well good," she says—a little too heartily? "What were they after? Oh, thanks, Dingo." She leans back as he sets a platter of fish down between us.

"They were after a cassette. Tell me about . . . your mother."

"You won't give an inch, will you?" She wraps a ball of rice in a sliver of

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pale fish, and pops it into her mouth. "Actually, I don't remember a lot about her."

"How convenient," I say dryly. She flushes, the first reaction I've gotten from her yet.

"Do you give a shit?" She puts down her half-eaten fish and stands up, angry all of a sudden. "I grew up in this camp in Gaza. Mom was one of the people who ran it. The other women were Palestinian and Jordanian. She made me speak English to her and I hated it. I hated sharing her with all the other kids, too, but we all had to share, you know?" Her skin seems too tight on her face. "Fadwa, Angele, Mother . . . they were the only mothers we were going to get. And then one day . . . she got killed. Shot by a sniper." She shrugged. "Syrian, Palestinian, Israeli—it could even have been a UN peacekeeper. Nobody cared except us." She looks down at the plate and her lips twist briefly. "I grew up, and, when I was old enough, I left the camp and came here. That's the end of the story." Her eyes are cold. "You know, I thought that being related meant something, but I guess it doesn't. Not to you, anyway. I already paid Dingo for the food. I'm out of here."

"Sabra, wait." I don't know what the hell to say. "Look, I'm sorry." Lame.

"For what?" She shoves between two of the planter boxes.

And yelps as a man hiding behind the planter grabs her.

"Hey!" She breaks his hold before I can even move, slamming an elbow into his belly just below his sternum. He chokes and doubles over, and she kicks him in the knee. Then she's bolting toward me. "Run!" she gasps.

And I do, because the dude is reaching into his pocket like he's got a weapon there. I guess he figures I've got the video on me. I crash through the branches of the shrubs on the far side of the empty tables, and pound after her as she races along the alley. The back of a warehouse turns the alley into a dead-end trap. In a moment, the dude will clear the bushes and have a clear shot at us. My God, I'm going to die for a stupid picnic!

"This way!" Sabra shoves a battered door open. We bolt through together, and I yelp as something splats against the doorjamb above my head. Drug caps, fired from a CO_2 gun? I slam the door, wondering if the caps are lethal. My knees want to shake. I can't *believe* this.

The lock won't slow him down much, so we run again, stumbling through dust and drifts of empty cardboard boxes, scrambling over an obstacle course of fallen shelving that trips us like the damn ruin wants to get us killed. Behind us hinges creak. I grab Sabra, yank her through a doorway. Stairs, not an exit. Damn, *damn*. We go up because we have to, and we make one hell of a racket on the metal stairs. They end at a fire door—blessedly unlocked—that lets us out onto the flat roof. Sunlight dazzles my eyes and I look around desperately. Trapped again.

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"Stairs!" Sabra points, and I say a small prayer that they're intact.

They are, although they're rusty as shit. We look down together, eyeing the fifteen-foot drop at the bottom where the last section has been removed. "I knew a way out," she says bitterly. "Why didn't you just follow me?"

I look at her and get it—that she *expected* this dude to show. "He's after *you,* not me." She shakes her head no, but she's lying. "Yeah, he is," I snarl. "Burglary is one thing, but that cassette isn't worth murder, honey." I grab her, shake her. "You've been playing me for a sucker on about three different levels. I'm through being a sucker. Leave me alone after this." I shove her away, lever myself feet first over the roof edge, and start climbing down.

I look at the ground once and regret it as the world tilts. White knuckled, I go down as fast as I dare. Flakes of rust shower down as Sabra scrambles after me. Then, suddenly, metal is groaning and the ladder is shaking. I cling to it, heart hammering as a chunk of metal clangs off the wall, inches from my face. Sabra gasps, and I look up.

The ladder is pulling away from the wall, bending outward. White dust sifts down like flour as anchor bolts tear out of the rotten concrete. For a frozen instant, she stares down at me, silent, her dark eyes full of terror and a weird calm.

And memory grabs me—a flash of hot sunlight, sweat stinging on my hands, and a dark-eyed little-girl face turned up to me, full of terror and calm as my young muscles strain to hold on. Below us, a lion coughs and I sob, but she is silent. . . .

The top of the ladder gives way, and she's falling, grabbing at the wall, the ladder, still silent. I let go with one hand, feet braced, not thinking, just reacting. My arm wraps around her as she slams into me and one foot slips off the rung. I grunt, reeling, fingers clenched around rusty salvation. For an instant we hang there, her weight and mine, swinging outward into gravity's arms, poised between sky and asphalt.

She reaches for the ladder in what seems like terrible slow motion. Her fingers brush it, and I want to scream for her to hurry, only my teeth are clenched and I don't dare move a muscle or my fingers will slip. Another inch . . . she curls her hand around the rung. With a sobbing gasp, she pulls us closer, and then I have my balance again. I get both feet back onto the rung and we're not going to fall, dear God, we're going to make it. Without a word, she scrambles over me and on down the ladder. Dropping from the bottom rung, she lands on her feet, rolls once, and gets up running.

"Hey!" I croak, but she's already rounding the corner of the warehouse. My legs are shaking. So are my arms. I climb the rest of the way down, and land hard when I drop.

Lying on my back on the hot asphalt, I stare up at the blue sky and

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wait for my muscles to stop trembling. My ribs hurt where she slammed into me. There is no sign of our pursuer. I watch a wisp of cloud shred across the hard blue of the sky, frowning. I had remembered . . .

What? Falling. Lions. Tears and terror as I struggled to pull her up from . . . the lion pen? Fragments of that memory are coming back. We had gone to the zoo and she had climbed over the fence while Mother was getting us ice-cream. For some reason, the alarm hadn't gone off. And I must have tried to stop her and she must have slipped—I don't really remember.

Sabra?

I close my eyes briefly, seeing those calm, desperate eyes as the ladder bends beneath her. The same eyes had looked up at me as the lion coughed. Or was I retrofitting yesterday? I think I remember, but I'm not sure. You can't ever be sure of yesterday. Not anymore. I sigh and get to my feet, every muscle in my body aching. And I go home to soak in a tub of hot water and see if anyone has bid on the cassette.

My Aunt Esther answers my access in realtime. My father's eldest sister, she's busy spending a lifetime of savings on as many extra years of tennis and young lovers as the body-shop professionals can give her. She's a sharp bitch, and I like her.

"Well, Joshua." She's wearing a tennis dress, and her tanned face is almost unwrinkled. The blonde hair is new. It's a virtual image, yeah, but I'm willing to bet that she's showing off the real item. She pays enough for it. Elegant muscles sculpt her shoulders and her smile is frosty. "I haven't heard from you in a very long time."

"That's because I'm a creep." I smile back. "I've never said otherwise."

"What do you want?" She raises one perfect eyebrow, not ready to forgive me yet. "I have a date."

"I hope she can keep up with you. I want to know if my mother had another kid. After she left Dad."

"Joshua, my love, why on Earth do you think I would know that?"

"Because you're a world-class gossip." I grin at her. "If you don't know, nobody does."

"You know, I've always liked your lip. It suggests that you are indeed my genetic relative." She nods briskly. "If your mother had another child, she didn't send *me* any birth announcement. But she wouldn't have." She shrugs. "I do know that she ran some kind of camp for refugee children out in New Palestine for a few years. She actually asked me to contribute money." She sounds affronted.

So that part of Sabra's story checks. That bothers me more than I want to admit. "When was this?" I ask.

She thinks for a moment. "She went to work for the organization about a year after she dumped you and your poor father."

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"She didn't dump me," I say through clenched teeth.

She lifts an eyebrow and doesn't answer.

"When she came back to visit—did you see her?"

"Joshua, I had no reason to socialize with her. She was no kin of *mine*." Offended now, she glances pointedly at her wrist. "My date is waiting, and yes, she can indeed keep up with me." There is no watch on her wrist. "Good-bye, dear." She vanishes.

I hadn't expected her to validate any part of Sabra's story. I pull off my goggles and gloves and toss them onto the terminal. I hadn't *wanted* her to validate any part of Sabra's story.

"You have a visitor," my House system announces two evenings later.

Lounging on my sofa, thinking about ordering a late dinner, I'm watching my copy of the Mayer video. The dark-haired kid stares at me over his shoulder, a hint of amusement in his aloof smile. "I tried to find you," I tell him softly. I'd paid for a database search of all the families in the upscale neighborhood. It was expensive, and I *still* didn't know who he was. I sigh and pause the screen. "House, who's there?"

The video image vanishes briefly, is replaced by a security-eye view of the apartment's entry. A slight figure stands in front of the barred gate, tapping one impatient foot.

Sabra.

I open my mouth to tell the House to refuse her. Then I see this flicker of movement in the shrubs beside the walkway. We've got good surveillance in our building. You can see a lot more than most people realize. "Let her in," I say quickly. Her image vanishes from the screen to be replaced once more by the mystery kid. He's still looking over his shoulder at me, and his eyes are still amused. Because I couldn't find any trace of him? "Are you hiding from me?" I ask softly. Released, he turns to watch the Frisbee fly past, chased by laughing children in nice clothes. I know all their names.

It's so easy to hide. You can erase yesterday from the database and it's like it never happened. You can write your own history. I don't look up as the door opens. She walks over to the sofa and sits down beside me as if she lives here. For a few minutes, we watch the Mayer aunts and uncles and cousins chase the Frisbee, eat fried chicken, and laugh as they drink sodas from aluminum cans.

"That's what people pay you for?" She isn't being flip—there's a soft edge of wonder in her voice. "Fifteen minutes of some stranger's picnic?"

"Well, Senator Mayer does show up in most of the history texts." I scan back to the beginning of the video. "Although a photo of Marilyn Monroe in curlers would be worth a whole lot more than this." She obviously doesn't know who Marilyn Monroe was. I sigh. "It's a chunk of the real past—like those dinosaur bones we dig up." The kid gives us his over-the-

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shoulder smile and I freeze him before he can turn to watch that damn Frisbee. "These are the only yesterdays we can be sure of." That kid is old now if he's still alive. "I don't think I'll ever find out who he is," I say out loud.

"That kid laughing at us? Does it matter?"

"No. Not really." Only to me, and I'm still not sure why.

She's nodding. "Maybe he's a ghost." Chin propped on her raised knees, Sabra stares thoughtfully at the screen. "If you hadn't grabbed me, I would have fallen. Maybe died."

"Broken something, anyway." I let the kid turn to watch the Frisbee fly by. Maybe he *is* a ghost.

"Why did you do it?" She's angry. "You damn near fell."

"Do you remember the lion pen?" I don't look at her, don't take my eyes from the screen. "At the zoo?"

Silence. I realize I'm holding my breath.

"No," she finally says. "Did we go to the zoo? Is this a trick question? I remember the airplane ride." Her voice strengthens. "I really liked the stewardess with the blue eyes. She gave me a package of gum. Oh, shit, I'm lying to you." She hugs her knees, her eyes fixed on the screen. "This is stupid. I came here to tell you the truth." That anger surfaces in her voice again. "The truth is that we shared her. We shared all of them. The Mothers, we called them. And they were."

She paused. "I . . . don't remember any other mother. I did go with her on the plane on some trips. I think she was asking people for money or something, but I was little and I don't even remember where we went. She called *all* of us her daughters." Sabra sounds wistful. "I . . . needed to go somewhere where I could maybe have some kind of future, you know? There wasn't any future for us in New Palestine. Not with the new racial-purity frenzy. We were all products of the UN peacekeepers." She laughs bitterly. "You could tell who had been there which year by the faces of the kids they left behind—half European, half Asian, half Bangladeshi. All of us half infidel." She shrugs. "As Sabra Perez, I could get US citizenship and come here." On the screen, the dark-haired kid stands with his arms crossed, his profile immensely patient. "I bet he's a refugee," she says softly. "One of those kids rich families take in. You know—the pretty ones."

It isn't likely. That kind of thing would have been documented, or at least would have shown up in one of the old society columns I searched. The Mayer family was in politics. They knew the value of good PR.

"That's what he is." Her voice trembles a little. "Just another refugee."

Maybe he was—although not in the sense she meant. I touch her shoulder lightly, and get to my feet. "Want some dinner?"

"I should go." She glances uncertainly at the door. "I . . . I said what I had to say."

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"Have some dinner first." I meander over to my terminal, put on goggles and gloves and access Wan Lung's. "You like Szechuan?"

"No meat, okay?" She makes a face. "I worked on a meat farm once."

"Kung Pao shrimp? Vegetarian chow yuk?" I place the order, remove my goggles and gloves. "The delivery-dude said five." Which is a lie. I picked Wan Lung's because it's way across town. The delivery-dude would have to haul even to make the ten she'd promised me. I nod at the screen as I reach for my jacket. "Find some entertainment if you want. I'm through with that vid." I sold the cassette this morning, for a very nice price.

"Man, you're cold-blooded—it's *warm* out." She eyes my jacket, then turns back to the screen. "It's kind of weird, watching this. Like looking through a window, you know? People don't know you're watching." She's speaking softly, as if to herself. "You look in and you're part of the family for a minute—eating takeout in front of the screen or arguing in the living room."

The kid on screen smiles at her like they know each other. She doesn't look up as I close the door softly behind me.

I am scared. Maybe as scared as I was on that afternoon at the zoo. I am sweating as I cross the lobby. This settles the score, I tell myself. After *this*, she can go away. I don't owe her anything. I open the barred gate and walk straight to the shrubs. "I have what you're after," I say to the shadows. "It's yours if you want it."

Silence. I listen to traffic noise and the scratchy sound of insects talking and begin to feel like a fool. Then I hear a soft breath, like a sigh.

"She gave it to you?" The low voice is male, I think. I can just make out a shape of deeper darkness among the branches.

"She planted it on me. She thinks I don't know."

"Want to define 'it'?" The voice is cold.

"I can't." I shrug. "But it's small enough to be stuck onto a sheet of paper and maybe look like a period or a blemish. So it's probably a microsphere. She hacked some code? Valuable data?"

"Your deal?" The flat words confirm my guess.

I reach very slowly into my jacket pocket, pull out the crumpled birth certificate. "It's on this."

Silence.

"I couldn't make a copy of whatever is on here, and I wouldn't even if I could. Not my line of work." I shrug. "No way to prove that, I guess. I don't like being used."

A gloved hand reaches from the shadows to lift the paper gently from my grasp. I turn away as a Wan Lung van pulls up at the curb. "There's my dinner."

The delivery-dude—a petite Asian girl wearing *tong* colors—blinks at me in surprise as I step into her path. "Kung Pao shrimp and Veggie

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chow yuk?" I glance at my watch as I fish out my card. "Nine point eight minutes." I nod and run the card through the battered reader she holds out, adding a generous tip.

"Hey, righty-oh bossman-San. Next time it's in eight, okay?" She gives me a wink and a grin, darts back to her van, and roars away.

The shadows behind the shrubs feel empty as I carry the white sack back into my building. Sabra blinks sleepily from the couch as I enter. "Did the dude get lost?" She yawns and fingers hair back from her face.

Dark shadows smudge the skin beneath her eyes, and I notice the healing scrapes from her fall. "I got to talking." I set the cartons on the table, and collect plates and silverware from the kitchenwall. "I've got a couple of beers if you want one."

"No thanks." She glances at my single window. The darkness beyond is spangled with city lights. She shivers. "I'd better take off."

"Here." I shove plate and fork into her hands, scoop rice onto my own plate and ladle on the Kung Pao. Wan Lung uses lots of garlic, and I realize suddenly how hungry I am. "Eat."

She does. Like a starving wolf. I offer her a choice of the two fortune cookies when we're finished, but she shakes her head.

"I have this weird superstition about those things. That they come true if you read them. I've really got to go." She gets up abruptly. "Thanks for dinner. Listen . . ." Her eyes shift to the blank screen and away. "Want to give me back that copy of my birth certificate? I . . . might need it sometime. You can keep the picture, if you want."

"It's only a copy."

"They cost money," she says tightly.

"You didn't come to tell me about my mother because I saved your ass." I stack the dirty plates, begin to nest the sticky cartons. "You told me so that you'd have an excuse to ask me for that birth certificate." I carry the dirty dishes to the kitchenwall counter. "Do you ever stop playing games?"

"No," she whispers. "I don't know how."

These words have the sound of truth. I toss the cartons into the recycle chute.

"I would have told you anyway, honest. Because it matters to you and . . . I don't have any other way to . . . pay you back for . . . catching me." She swallows. "I already looked for the damn birth certificate. It wasn't here. Did you throw it away?"

"So it *was* you who broke in." I turn around sharply. "What did you do? Hack my key codes?"

She nods miserably, her eyes on the floor. Dead pale now, the circles beneath her eyes stand out sharply. "What's on it?" I ask "Access codes?"

"Manufacturing codes for a new line of smart-valves," she says in a nearly inaudible voice. "The corporate watchdogs found out I took it. You threw it *away?*" She sits down as if her legs won't hold her up anymore.

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Camp kid, unwanted leavings of a UN peacekeeper and some local woman. I wonder if she would have given me that gift of truth if she hadn't wanted the certificate? Maybe. Maybe not.

It occurs to me that truth is as unreliable as yesterday. I sigh. "I gave it to the man who was waiting for you outside."

"Outside?" she breathes.

"In the bushes. I saw him on the screen when I let you in." I shrug. "I told him that I didn't make a copy. I hope he believed me."

"You can't copy it. *I* couldn't, anyway." She glances nervously at the door. "They'll know it wasn't copied when it doesn't show up on the black market. Look, I . . ." She hesitates and for an instant the mocking, in-control mask vanishes. "Thanks," she says very quietly. "I kind of . . . blew it."

Maybe they would still punish her, as an example to other would-be pirates. Maybe they wouldn't, if she behaved herself, maybe got a legit job. I rack the dishes in the dishwasher with a clatter, remembering her face on that ladder—those familiar eyes. She had gone on plane trips with my mother, she said. To ask for money.

My mother *could* have had another kid. They all shared her, all the kids. It's easy to remember that you weren't special.

"Check with me later," I say as she opens the door.

She looks back blankly.

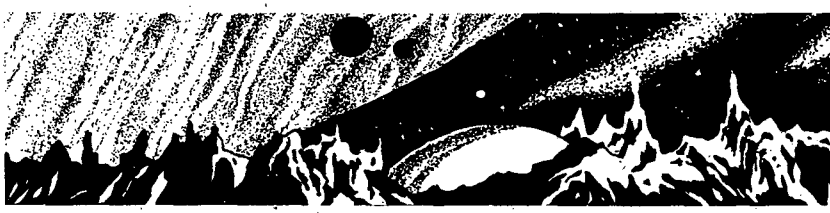
"You wanted a job, remember?" I shrug. "I might give you a try."

"Oh. Yeah." She blinks. "I did." Her smile is a smile, not a grin. "Hey, look, I might just do that, okay?" Then she gives me a flip wave and is out the door. It closes softly behind her.

I turn the screen back on and run the video to where the ghost-kid looks over his shoulder at me. I pick up my fortune cookie and break it open.

Yesterday meets tomorrow only in the heart. On a sudden whim, I crack the other cookie. Sabra's. *You will gain a new business partner.* Huh. I have a feeling that she'll work out—as long as I don't trust her too much. I watch the dark-haired boy watch the Frisbee. "Okay," I tell him. "I'll quit looking. You get to write your own history." Each of us does, I guess.

I blank the screen and get up to give Irene a call to see if she's got any new tips for us. ●



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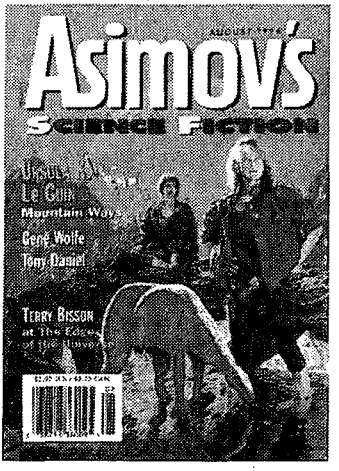

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Kit Reed

WHOEVER

One of Kit Reed's short stories appeared in the January 1995 issue of the *Yale Review*, and her most recent novel, *J, Eden*, was published by Hardscrabble Books last spring. As Kit Craig, the author has written several psychological thrillers. Her latest, *Strait*, was published by Headline (UK) in 1995, and a new one is scheduled for release sometime next year.

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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1.

No way could this Doris and Sam McDaniel be my real parents. I mean, look at me with the skinny wrists and ankles, coffee skin and fine black hair. Look at them.

No way. No way could I come from *this.*

Poor Sam and Doris are all, like, dead pink, like those pink plastic babies you get by the hundred down at Kmart? Grey hair, legs like boiled hot dogs; soft, humongous butts. Mrs. QVC-queen-size-shopping queen says she's my mother, but how? She, like, waddles like Daffy in her Delta Burke crepe sole wedgies, and dumb? Doris thinks your electronic bulletin board is cork in a frame, that you stick messages on it with colored tacks. Don't-talk-like-that-to-your-father is smarter, *but.* Mr. Show-me-some-Respect goes out in short-sleeved white polyester shirts with the pocket protector?

Like the Mont Blanc ballpoint Sam got for twenty-five years of service in the software department at Digital is going to color his pocket black, or accidentally stab him in the chest.

They are like refrigerators. Big and white and square.

There's got to be some mistake. For I am *special,* whereas Sam and Doris are terminally *old* and way gross, just two more cogs on the treadmill to oblivion, that mysteriously got control of me. Treadmill to oblivion, that's cool, did I make it up?

Two, like, cogs? Or they were until the trial happened and we all got in the news.

Honor your father and mother, right?

Right. As soon as I find out who they really are.

I figure my real parents are, like, the last emperors of India? Bad guys conquer the palace. The queen bops over to Middletown, U.S.A. and hides her baby with this nice old peasant couple, right?

Ahah. Our enemies will never think to look for her here.

Unless my real folks are, like, deposed from some exploded planet like, Krypton? And I am, like, the long-lost daughter of somebody major, like, you know, Jor-El and Kal-El?

I am faster than a speeding bullet, I can leap you in a single bound.

When you don't belong, you're the first to know you don't belong. When my real mom and dad come back for me, everything will change.

I don't want you to think I'm not out there looking for them. Days I break into fat Sam's home computer and zap off on the Infobahn. I am all over with notes and clues, like: My real name isn't Susie McDaniel, you're looking at Electra/Cassandra/Layla you-name-it. Ring a bell? I describe the birthmark and the special baby bracelet? Like the emperors of India had to dump me here to save my life but they marked me so when I grew up I would know?

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I zing around the noosphere like Hansel and Gretel, except instead of bread crumbs I drop my secret electronic address, two symbols. Even you can reach me if you know.

Sam could die of old age before he finds my secret mailbox encoded on his system, it's hidden so deep that I and only I have the technology to log in.

Forget Doris. She's scared of the computer. Like radiation will leak out and mutate your genes, as if she had any left. Sneaks in and sprays the IBM with Raid to get rid of bugs in the system, like they'll crawl up your legs and get in the food.

She's all, "I don't want you playing in there."

No problem. I have other ways of getting in touch. Nights I hang in on the back porch roof and throw my whole soul out into space. *Sending,* okay?

If you're out there and you hear me, YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE.

No way do I belong on the planet Maple Shade Road in the Middletown system, stuffed in the units' idea of a cute sleeping capsule, beating up on Blue Teddy and sobbing my guts out on the ruffles while everybody I care about is hanging out at the mall.

I am stuck in here because of the fight.

It started because Sam and Doris are shitty to me, like, "Grounded, bla bla." "Can't go to the mall because you charge too much." "Clean up your room and stay away from that Duane guy, you're seeing him too much." *"Did you do that to your hair?"*

Doris's screaming like I am this ax murderer when all I did was charge a jacket at Compagnie Express.

I am pissed and yelling back when Sam comes in. He is, like, "What do you think you are, special?"

"Damn straight I'm special."

"Well I'll special you, miss Princess of the earth and air." For a fat guy too old to be a father, he can really yell. He is just starting, wuow. It is get-down ugly, all about how I never take off my Discman phones except to ask for money, and how I treat this Doris you-never-call-me-Mommy like the maid. Plus I'm never nice to Grandma Horton, which is true. Grandma is definitely where all of Doris's fat genes came from. She hates me for I am skinny and therefore special, plus instead of kicking Doris into Weight Watchers Grandma Horton just sucks in her own stomach and buys my putative mom the flowered smocks in Godzilla plus. Grandma thinks keeping Doris fat makes her look smaller, which it does not, so I say so and Sam gets really pissed.

Okay, one thing leads to another and I say something really shitty, never mind what, and Sam lets me have it with his belt.

No way am I going to let the peasants see me cry. I push them out and

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while they are banging on my door and going "We didn't mean it," I snake out on the porch roof.

Then I spin out into the dark and silence, and SEND. If I concentrate, if I can just locate the chosen blank spot between stars and *throw*, I feel like I can astrally project. So if my real mom and dad the deposed emperors of everywhere are out there, AND I KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE, they'll get my signal and home in.

This is what I am beaming: Mmmmmmmaaaaaaaamaaaaa.

You want to know what's weird? I think I hear something back.

I am totally into it, but then Stephanie and Patty and Gert and Tiffany come by on the way to the mall in these cool Dayglo vests. I'm like, hanging over the edge. "Where'd you get those?"

"Peepers."

I want one too. But I am on the roof.

They're like: "What are you up there, Tom Sawyer or something?"

I'm all, "What, do you think Tom Sawyer whitewashes roofs?"

Then Tiffany goes, "I saw Duane and them heading for Victoria's Secretions."

Duane. He looks just like Dylan, okay? I jump down. "Let's go."

Why should I get all bent waiting on the mom from nowhere when I might run into cute Billy or sexy Duane down at the mall?

Which is how I get caught crunching the hedge on my way out and why-can't-you-be-like-other-girls-and-call-me-Daddy nails a grate over the bedroom window and shuts me in. "No supper for you."

Like I want their rotten supper?

"You eat it," I growl. It will be rutabaga. "Serve you right."

Then Doris comes into my room, bad cop, good cop, she's supposed to play best friend. "Oh Susie, why can't you be like other girls?"

And I'm all, "Fuck you, Mother, I am not like all other girls." I spare her the rest. *For I am better.* I know it, deep in the fine bones in my slender ankles. I am the queen.

Her fat face crumples. "At least you could try."

"I don't want to be like other girls." I kite a CD at her like a ninja throwing blade.

She ducks. "At least you could be nice to me." It lodges in the wall behind her head.

"Name one reason." I zing another.

Zap. "Because you're our *daughter*."

So I let her have it. "Oh no I'm not."

Surprise. This doesn't nail her like I expect. She doesn't cry. Instead fat Mrs. Call-me-Mother takes three heavy steps backward like stops on the train to a place you don't want to get to.

Then my God, her voice comes hurtling out of a tunnel, all black wind. "How did you find out?"

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This squeezes me dry. "Say *what?*"

But she doesn't hear my silence. She's too wound up. "Your dad and me, we worked so hard to get you and now . . ." She is driven to distraction. Mrs. claims-she's-my-mother is shuffling through my candy wrapper collection like it contains secret letters that if she can just put them together this will make sense. Tears glubble up. "Now you won't even speak to me."

Now, when it is too late, she cries. I am focused on what she has just dropped, like By the Way. I speak to her all right, I am all over her. "*What do you mean you worked so hard to get me?*"

"We wanted kids so *much*." She sounds so ashamed. "When we got around to it we were too old." Doris's voice squeezes out. "Everything was all dried up."

"So. What? Am I a black market baby or what?" Right, I am really a Brazilian princess, S. and D. embezzled many hundreds of K off Digital to buy me from the palace maid.

Doris just buries her chins in the stripes she thinks are slenderizing and won't face me. She squeaks. "You know."

I don't, really.

By this time she can hardly get the words out. "Sperm bank." *Gasp.* "Surrogate mom." *Glub glub choke struggle.* But she sounds happy, happy! *Gulp strangle.* At last she produces it. "You."

I am coming at this carefully, and slow. "What?"

She's all: *gack.* "It cost a fortune, but . . ."

"Gross!"

"I wasn't going to tell you, all the books say not to, but now . . ." Oh boy she is taking in so much air that she is getting bigger. In a minute the Ivana Trump pearls are going to pop right off her neck and Doris will start to float. "The. Ah. Woman said she was only doing it because she loves to help people but now . . ."

I am shouting. "WHAT WOMAN?"

"Your. Ah. Surrogate mom." She just lofts this grenade without looking to see where it hits.

What do you mean, *mom?* The grenade rolls into a corner of my heart.

"She's gone to court." Deep sob. "She wants . . ."

Ka-BLAM. "I have a *mother?*" I lose it altogether. I grab her and dig in with all ten fingers. "What? She wants *what?*"

Finally the words fall out of her. "She wants you back."

So I drop her. "Wuoow." This is big. It is like an invitation, right? Doris lays where I put her, looking up at me with those big old milky mother-eyes, so totally by accident I'm like, "Oh, Mom."

Mistake. She bobs up like an inflatable clown with this awful, eager smile. "You called me Mom!"

"Yeah but I didn't mean it," I say.

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2.

It turns out one reason Sam and Doris hated me going malling is Duane but the other is money. They're paying so many lawyers that they're broke. See this surrogate mom figured out that I'm the only kid she'll ever have now that her biological clock has struck midnight. She says I'm hers and she's hired lawyers to get me back.

Until *Inside Edition* kicks in with a payoff and *Current Affair* comes up with a counter offer, which is as soon as I get on *Oprah,* we are practically on food stamps. Forget *Hard Copy,* the surrogate mom has them sewed up, she and her new man Burt are the top of the show all week, "Mother love laughs at lawyers," you know. I'd love to watch her on TV but to protect the innocent they call her Mrs. X and moosh her face behind an electronic grid.

Like, do I have her eyes?

I get the units together for a conference in the living room. I am ready to tear them up in little pieces and feed them to the disposal. They have this William Wurbelow present. Esquire. Sam is like, "After all sweetheart, he is your lawyer."

"Speak for yourself, white man." Then I let them have it. "I've got a real mother and you didn't tell me?"

But they're all, "We thought we were protecting you."

"A real mother and you're *protecting* me?"

"Birth mother."

"And you keep it secret that she wants me back?"

"It's for the best," the lawyer says.

"We're your parents now."

"Really," Sam says. "Clean break. It's the only way. It says so in all the parenting books."

"You learned how to do this from a book!"

Doris's eyes fill up. "They came in the basket when we adopted you. You're legally ours."

"Yours!" I look at these two and what I feel is, I feel relieved. Like I could possibly come out of these *lumpy people.* Old and slow and heavy, like a retard could of made them, out of flour and mud? I go, "No way!"

Doris sobs.

I grab this Wurbelow esquire by his Save the Whales tie. I start twisting and I growl, "What's her name?"

He just kind of strangles and won't answer.

I twist the tie some more. "I said, what is her name?"

I think he gurgles, "Loretta."

Truth? I don't believe him. No way has my mom the empress got a hick name like Loretta. Something's wrong here, okay? I give his tie another twist.

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I have a real mother somewhere; I always knew it. We need to meet. I have to look her in the face.

He is turning a funny color. One more twist and he will be all out of breath. Sam grabs my elbow, hard. "Don't," he says.

"Out of my face, I am Princess Leia."

Sam goes, "You're too young."

Doris groans. "Oh God."

The lawyer is gagging. I wrench the tie some more.

Sam jerks my hands off. "I said, don't."

If I hurt the lawyer he may walk out on us so I stop. Old Sam uses spit to rub the smudges off his pocket protector and even though he isn't sure he has my attention he says something that I am too weirded out to take in completely at the time. "This Loretta Huggins isn't the real mother, believe us. She's only the host."

I am filing the name for future reference. I say, "The *host!*"

Not-my-mother looks at me and blushes. That terrible shame! Doris's voice drops to a whisper. "We wanted a baby so much. We were desperate."

"Oh shit." I look at Sam. I look at her and I think about ugly things like petri dishes and turkey basters, I think about kids growing up in jars and I think it is pretty disgusting. It's like finding out your parents got you by having sex and they might still be having it. No. It's like finding out your parents got you by having sex and they even *liked* it, way grotesque.

I've got white-water crazies crashing behind my eyes.

The whole thing is so revolting that I run upstairs. I'm ready to york them into the toilet. Sam. Doris. William Wurbelow Esquire.

They yell after me, "Don't worry, we're going to fight this."

"Don't bother," I yell.

Asshole Doris is going, "Don't worry, she's just upset."

And me? I pry off the grate and roll out on the roof. I am in such an altered state that if I astrally project I might just astrally get there. Except the Action News van is in our driveway and News Eight is trying to look inconspicuous in the Otto the Orkin Man truck parked across the street. So I sneak into Sam's computer and hurl myself on the Infobahn, but my E-mail is junked up with flames, plus nasty questions from every hacker in the infosphere because while I wasn't looking we got on the news.

We are pretty much on worldwide TV. This surrogate mom Loretta is on a lot, but all I see is electronic squares. All I know is what I read in the papers, and what I read is this. Poor little Susie/Melissa is being deprived of her natural birth mother, which is a violation of mothers' rights everywhere, on account of Sam and Doris gave Loretta not much money to play cow and now that poor, exploited Loretta is married to a nice man, she wants her baby back.

Melissa! Cool name. But wait. Sam and Doris claim I am being ripped

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out of my chosen family that gives me everything by a paid brood mare who could care less. Like, this fine upscale Route 128 split level couple has given up the world for me, and now . . .

Like I chose them?

Who asked *me* who I wanted to be? Plus something about the whole thing is *not right;* what can I say? Stuff they aren't saying. Stuff Doris at her most desperate won't tell.

So I go out on the roof at midnight and in spite of the floods trained on the house in case of late-breaking news, I start, and, weird! It's dark out there and dense, like a zillion black holes all linked and shifting like the nap on velvet. I am sending into a silence so deep that even you can feel it, and you know what?

MMmm. Maybe I am getting something back.

Then, the last night before we go to court?

I am out there, I've been out there for hours. The news guys have wrung the last word out of us and packed up and gone home. Wurbelow is leaving. Sam and Doris have run out of tears, and me? I am wired to the eyeballs and the fingernails, vibrating in every synapse and all visible and invisible connections, I am on the verge and I could swear to you that something or somebody out there is receiving.

I feel particles of the universe dislodging and reassembling. Something large is stirring out there and I could swear to you that light years removed as it is, whatever it is, it's waking, huge and ponderous, and. Say *what?* It's starting out.

But there's this racket in the yard below, giggling and disruption and then I hear, like, "So, are you coming or what?"

"I'm busy." *Something moving.* Excited and scared. Should I wait for it to reach me or should I call Geraldo or E-mail NASA or what?

"Like, are you too good for us?" It's Stephanie and Gert, Patty and Tiffany. They have on cool earrings and incredible boots and I have not been shopping for days. I've been so tied up with being on TV and all that I am out of touch.

Homing in on me.

"So what are we, supposed to tell Duane that you don't want to sit with him?"

Wuoow. I'm like, "Duane!"

Tiffany goes, "If you don't want him, I do." Some friends. Like they care if I'm famous, they don't even care if I belong to Sam and Doris or the empress. Like Tiffany cares if I love Duane.

Stephanie is a real friend, she goes, "Come on. It's *Rocky Horror* retro-night."

"No way!"

"Way."

Think about it. Stephanie and Tiffany and all, plus *sexy* Duane plus

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Billy, you name it, us in black and white makeup and loaded with toast and rice, girls, boys, everybody jumbled in the dark until you can't tell whose hands are whose, or where. "Wait up."

As I skid down the stairs and bomb out into the cool world I hear the lawyer going, "Don't worry, tomorrow we go before the judge." You would think he was cheering old Sam and Doris up instead of signing their death knell. "Wherein I've earned my money. Judge Murtaugh has agreed to let your daughter choose."

3.

So. What. This Loretta doesn't look like the empress, but at least she isn't way old like Doris, and our shapes match. She's, like, taller, plus the not fat. In the courtroom Sam and Doris are crying and I'm like: should I, shouldn't I, but hey, Loretta promised never to ground me, plus I get a free ride to wherever because the Birth Mother and her cute new husband that's so *way* younger love Burger Chef and line dancing and hanging out at the mall.

I don't know, at the time Loretta and Burt Huggins looked okay, like cool in the tight jeans and concho belts and the genuine python boots with matching shanks, my kind of people, right? With a good eye for merchandise, like way judicious, catalogues *plus* malls. Burt is way nice to me and Loretta has great hair. It's cool to have a mom that you don't have to put a bag over her head to keep your cool friends from thinking you're a dweeb.

But, hey. A., they are not on-line. Burt doesn't even know where that is, that's two. So I, like, have to get back on the Infobahn, but if I turn up at Sam's and try to log in now, he and Doris will catch me and start slobbering and beg me to come back after I had to lie and everything to get away.

They came to the McDaniels' to bring me and my things to their neat condo with the swimming pool? They came in the copper flake van with western sunsets in the back windows and the horseshoe motif, and the wire wheels were cool. The new Watchman was cool and the way this Loretta fitted her hip against mine in the studded jeans like we were kid friends at the mall instead of mother-daughter, that was cool, but on the sidewalk behind us Doris and Sam, they just bummed me out. They brought me home from the hospital fourteen years ago and cleaned up the vomit and bought me frilly bedspreads and there they were waving and trying to be brave and I felt shitty, plus as the strobes flashed and we rode away I felt this faint, like, sound way back somewhere inside of me? Ka-*ping*.

And this is what flashed across the front of my mind like a LCD dis-

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play as I rode out of Sam and Doris's life forever except for alternate weekends and every other Christmas and two weeks every summer to be negotiated on a situational basis:

How are they ever going to find you now?

And *Duane.* My gosh he's running along and jumping up to see in the van window plus Stephanie and Billy and them are bobbing behind so I'm. I'm yelling, loud, "Scooby's!" so I won't get lost from them. Which isn't what I'm really scared of getting lost from. It's whatever I felt stirring out there in the big black universe, last night on the roof. It is sad when we drive away.

But Burt is winking at me and Loretta is half-strangling me, mooshing my face close to show the cameras we are happy, *happy* together and Judge Murtaugh and *Hard Copy* were right, and all my teeth itch because at the back of my heart I hear: ka-*ping.*

I have to get to the condo roof so I can *send.*

Plus, I need to find the sperm bank? Like, I have to find out what Kryptonites and Nobel prizewinners made deposits there on a certain date because I did not come from cheesy Loretta, no way.

It's twelve o'clock. Do you know where your mother is?

So I'm still waiting on them. My real mom and dad, Obi Wan or Jor-El and the empress of India or queen of the stars, but meanwhile me and the Hugginses are rolling away from Maple Shade forever and I'm like, WAIT!

And this Loretta is going, "Cool! We meet with the TV producers about me playing *me* in our life story right after Burger King, so how about you call me Mommy for now?" So it turns out she wanted me back just to wedge her into show business. It sucks.

I am already thinking, At least nice old Sam and nice dumb Doris, they really wanted me for me.

So it turns out that B. is, where you get to doesn't always turn out to be where you really wanted to go?

4.

Here's weird. It isn't just old Sam and Doris calling me on the Totalphone, we talk late at night while Burt and Loretta are out bopping at Fuddruckers, Sam and Doris fight over the receiver and take turns asking me how am I really and sometimes we cry on the phone. But that isn't the weird part.

I am hearing from somebody else.

Late at night after they come in and way early, while they're still snoring in their purple sleep masks and matching satin briefs, I hear these odd noises in the, like, purple bathroom? I was in there scoping all the

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drug names on the bottles in their medicine chest, looking for stuff that you snort or lick to make you feel good, but all I found was goldflake nail polish and Grecian formula in his color so even though he's cute and he flirts as good as Duane, Burt is older than you think.

And then. This is so weird! At first I thought it was bad plumbing. Sit on the lavender shag puffy seat on the purple toilet and you hear a voice like, spiraling? Like it is seeping out out of somewhere near the purple bath mat under the purple sink. I can't make out it but it makes my individual hairs crawl.

Whatever, or whoever, going, *MMMMMmmm. MMMmm*, naming all the best things you can dream of or hope for or imagine, but is it fixing to come out or asking me in?

I can't be in there with it another second but I can't stay away either, because the voice or transmission—whatever! It's just about to come clear, like in the second after next I am going to make out what it says.

Who knows how it found me, since I haven't been sending at all. I've been too distracted. It's enough already, trying to keep up with my old friends when I'm stuck in a tough new school where I'm scared to go to the bathroom until I get home. Plus this Loretta threw away my cool clothes, I have to wear these Laura Ashley flowers because she is the babe here, whereas I, the true and beautiful Princess call-me-Leia, She-ra, Red Sonya, am only a little girl. She says I'm already too old to play me in the TV version of my life story which we will get paid for as soon as her people okay the deal memo and we get the commitment from Home Box.

Plus she's like, "Susie, I don't want this Duane around."

"Hey wait. You said my real name is Melissa."

"Oh, that." Loretta snorts a line. "I made that up for the judge. And listen. No boyfriends. It makes me look old." Plus, Laura Ashley and patent leather shoes! Plus I'm not allowed to go out. So I'm like, oh shit, you go all the way to court to change moms and end up worse than Sam and Doris. Like, this mom totally sucks.

Like I don't have enough problems, Burt comes on to me under the condo pool lights and Loretta gets pissed. After all, he did call me Melissa, plus promising me red glitter boots.

So Loretta and me tangle in the purple bathroom, where I am heading in case, not knowing they had words and Burt took off and left Loretta behind. She's in there sobbing out her guts.

"Oh shit."

She looks daggers at me from the toilet where she is sitting on the lavender puff but she's cool. All she says is, "Go away."

So I try to be nice. I am all There there. Like Doris when Duane was mean to me. "Don't feel bad. Even the best guys need a little space sometimes."

"What are you, trying to make me feel good?"

What am I? Trying to get her out of the bathroom so I can listen for the

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voice underneath the sink. I give the speech that Sam and Doris bought from the marriage counselor. A thousand bucks and it's all they got. "You have to grab the day and live your life."

Don't ask why this freaks her. Loretta is like, "That's fine for you to say, you're only a kid, whereas I am on the sunset trail." Then she lets me have it. "Homewrecker!"

So I'm, "Fuck you, I'm only fourteen years old."

"Going on thirty."

"That's a cliché." Then I really piss her off. "Be nice or I'll go back to my real mother."

Then boy does she burn me past the fingertips and right on down to the second knuckles. "Mother. Fuck that shit. You don't even know who your real mother is."

"Doris, at this point. Like, she brought me up. She took care of me." My head is kind of clicking in one direction. Soon it will make a full circle on my neck. "All you did was pop the egg."

"Boy," she says, "boy are you dumb." Behind her there are faint noises rising: *MMMMMMmmmm* and getting louder. *MMMMMMMmmmmm.*

The words surge up from deep memory: *"She's only the host."*

MMMMMMMMMM.

I'm like, Say *what?*

But she is yelling. "You think they waste bankable sperm on old bags like me? Not when they've got your rock stars and Nobel prize guys to sell rich clients. Brain surgeons. Poet laureates." She pats her pelvis. "Good stuff like that, they pay to get it shoved in on top of solid gold."

The quarter drops. The news rolls out like a buy out of a ball gum machine. "You're not even my . . ."

"Surrogate mom. I did the deed, I didn't pop the egg."

Wuoow. I don't know how this makes me feel.

"Truth is, I'd be ashamed to pop an egg that turned out a rotten kid like you." She pushes me down on the lavender puff. "Now you sit here and think about that for a while." She slams out and locks me in. Through the door I hear her going, "If you knew where the egg came from you would puke. Think about it." She kicks the door: Wham! She kicks it so hard I know the life story deal isn't working out. "You think about it good." Then she yells for good and all, "And keep your sticky hands off Burt."

And all the time the noises are surrounding me like angels trying to scoop me up and fly me off to someplace better; the buzz is getting louder and I don't know why it makes my nose itch and all the back hairs on my neck crawl. *MMMMMMMMMMMMMMM.*

So. What. I speculate. Space shuttle disaster descendent, look, I could be. Or pilfered off one of the Kennedy women or even Lady Di. Or. What. *MMMMMMMMmmmmmmmm.* The daughter of the empress for real. It comes to me that I have been thinking too small.

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MMMMmmmm. I ammmmmm. . . .

The daughter of something grand out there.

She may be the queen of space.

The *mmmmmmmmm* keeps rising until I can't hear anything else and then I understand that all this time, ever since I first started *sending,* she's been hurtling my way. All this time I've been trapped in here with Burt and Loretta she has been shimmering outside, waiting for me to crunch through the last barrier.

"Mommy!" I cry and close my eyes against her huge beauty. I sink to the floor underneath the toilet, fully expecting what I most want to come flooding in. Across town Doris sits up in the night and goes: *You called?*

Outside the door, Loretta goes, "You called?"

I yell at her. "Not you, asshole."

"What's going on in there?"

Then this huge, sweet voice kind of wraps me up in itself. *I've been here the whole time, sweetheart.* It isn't exactly speech.

Loretta is like, "Kid, Kid!"

So I off her. "Shut up, you're only the host."

MMMMMMMmmmmmm . . . Wraps around me and curls tight and is all, *I thought you'd never call.*

I open one eye. Mmmmm . . . *om?* She's there but she isn't there. Like, I know she's there but I can't see her? *Mommy.* I'm like, "I don't suppose you'd get rid of this Loretta for me."

She goes, *Not like you want.*

Loretta's broken the key off in the lock and is wrenching the door handle. So I'm, "If you love me you'll get rid of her."

But she's like, *No way. I have retained a lawyer.*

So *weird!*—I hear her but no way can I see. "Your voice!" It is so *beautiful.*

We'll settle this the right way. In court.

I can feel it. She's about to lift and go.

"And you'll love me and take me to the mall and everything?"

But she is lifting out of my presence. *After all, I am your mother.* I either do or don't hear a *whoosh.* It doesn't matter. She's just as gone.

5.

Which as much as anything is how me and raunchy Burt and old Loretta and lumpy Sam and Doris and the new mom with the beautiful voice that I think of as The Mother from Space—how all of us contenders plus Patty and Stephanie and all, like Tiffany, who is fucking holding hands with Duane, all end up in a shoot-out in the federal courtroom back in front of Judge Murtaugh, who keeps scratching his head and

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squinting at me because like me, he thought he was right but now he's wrong and if he isn't right, he can't for the life of him figure out what the right thing is.

The judge may not know, but I do. When you are a, like, totally *special* person like me, there's got to be an explanation, e.g., God came down and went: *Voilá.*

Except if this is going to be so good why do I feel so bad?

The space mother is here but I can't see her is one thing. She's testifying via closed circuit TV and instead of electronic squares covering her face to protect the innocent, they are filling the entire screen. Mostly purple squares, CNN can't explain it, and you want to know what weird is? Weird is, nobody knows where's she's transmitting from, only that she is being beamed in. And another batch of weird? Even when she isn't talking I can hear her voice inside, vibrating all the way down to where my soul hides, song without any words that I know, and there's noplace I can hide from her or blot it out, The Mother from Space going *MMMMMmmmmmmm.*

William Wurbelow, Esquire is there for Sam and Doris, and for Loretta, *Hard Copy* has sprung for Vincent Bugliosi *and* Alan Dershowitz, who's already on Chapter Two of his book about us. The Mother from Space has the entire law office of Deveboise, Plimpton and somebody, and you want to know what else is weird? They've never seen her either, she communicates by fax and E-mail, cool!

It turns out there is nobody here for me.

I can't even sit with Patty and them, you know, my friends? Tiffany and Duane with his sweet eyes and that dirty grin.

We are like stuck listening to the lawyers talk lawyer, bla tort bla, while my friends giggle safe in the back and I am stuck up front freaking because Tiffany is all over Duane. It is revolting, she's got her tongue in his ear. Like I don't see? I could die up here in the Laura Ashley dress except every once in a while I catch Duane looking at me over Tiffany's shoulder with this grin.

After a while the contenders get to testify and I'm listening to nice old Sam go on and on and on while Doris sniffles and I want to reach out and touch someone but I am totally bored, plus in the heat of the fight Loretta said this *amazing thing* to me about shoveling the Nobel prizewinner in on top of pure gold.

Pure gold! So the whole time she's testifying about natural law and property rights I'm like hey, I am not your pedigreed rottweiler, I am a *princess.* And the queen has come to take me back. If Loretta's the host, I want to hear from the guest. Except that even though The Mother from Space is shimmering behind the electronic grid up there on the screen, the lawyers do all the talking. "Plant a garden," Mr. Deveboise or Mr. Plimpton says, asserting her rights, "and the crop is yours."

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Here they are chasing each other around the block about nature versus nurture when I don't even know what nurture is.

So partly I am bored but I'm also frustrated listening to all this N. vs. N. this, divine right of mothers that; after a while even though eight lawyers are begging me to chill I raise my hand.

So, cool! Judge Murtaugh calls on me.

I'm like, "Don't you guys care what I think?"

The judge is all, "We heard what you think six months ago and here we are back again in the same old story in the same old place."

"I didn't know what I was doing, okay?" I'm looking at Sam and Doris with their big hands and soft mouths and their wet eyes, oh wow they are so totally in love with me. I can see them going, *Way* and I am thinking, They would never let me go out with Duane, they don't approve of Duane. So I have to go: Sigh. No way. Then I look at Burt and Loretta and I'm all, boy, copper flake vans and purple everything totally a prison make, plus even though The Mother from Space is not present I can hear her: *MMMMMMMMMmmmmmmm*, that fills me up with promises of love and everything I ever want.

It is like, an inspiration.

The words come into my mind. "I didn't know what I was doing when I asked to go with Loretta, but now I really know, okay?"

The judge is like, "Are you sure?"

"Here's how sure I am. I totally swear that whatever I say this time, until the end of the world, *that's it*."

The judge gives me this look. "For good and all?"

So maybe it's a mistake but I'm getting this *MMMMMmmmmmMMMMM* louder and louder *MMM* it's so loud now that I know this is what I've got to do. Besides, the judge has pushed me to it. Like, he thinks I'm too young and stupid to know? "Whatever it takes!"

"You swear?"

I shout so loud that the space mother can definitely hear me. Wherever she is. "I swear. I'll sign a paper. I make up my mind for good and all and everybody promises to be okay with it. Right here on worldwide TV." I yell at Judge Murtaugh. "Are you okay with that?"

He's like, "If that's what you want." He is trying to sound judicious but I see his sad eyes. What he's really like is, he's like: *It's your funeral.*

"Well, it's what I want."

Every square in the electronic grid wriggles in a different color purple. *MMMMmmm.*

I'm thinking the space mother has got to be beautiful. I'm thinking she'll take me out and buy me things and she'll reallyreally love Duane, and in the back of my mind somewhere I am listening and what I think I hear is her going, *I will reallyreally love Duane* so I go on quick, before the judge can change his mind.

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"It's what I really, really want." I grin straight into the cameras. I yell. "This is it, okay? It's, like, my final vow."

Loretta is way pissed. Sam and Doris are crying like lost causes and all I can hear inside my head is *MMMMMMMMMMMMMM* so right there in front of the world I do it, I give myself over to my real mother the empress of Everything and it feels right, inside I am all squashy like, Knock me Over and wham, crash, they get it typed and rubber stamped and in front of everybody I sign the thing.

You'd be amazed at how fast a court can get out a decree.

And just as I am making a circle over the I in my new name which I have decided is going to be *She-Leia*, I hear Don Pardoe, who doesn't work for E.T., going, "And now by special arrangement, live, *Entertainment Tonight* brings you the *long-awaited reunion* between long-lost space mother and natural child. . . ."

And the door behind the judge's bench flies open and she comes out.

A lot of people scream.

So there she is, and gag me, she is purple, and wuoow, there are tentacles, if you thought Doris was fat, next to this Doris is Princess Slenderella, big fluorescent green belly, freak me out!

But *Inside Edition* and *Hard Copy* are watching, plus C-Span and *Current Affair* to say nothing of the program that brought about this meeting, like, I have obligations to *Entertainment Tonight.* Plus I have sworn to the court that this time it's forever, and *MMMMMMmmm* she is yearning at me with all those tentacles and if I have a problem with this I am way late saying it so I go: "Wuow."

And the space mother goes, "Hey." Then she goes: "Where did you get that awful flowered dress?"

So the deed is done for good right there in front of all of you and I don't know what's next or even if the space mother is going to let me stay in Middletown where my friends are and you can still get to the mall? But for a start she really wants me and at least she likes Duane, and like it or not she and I are now legally bonded and if Doris runs out of the courtroom crying because she can't bear this and poor old Sam runs after her because he can't bear to see the last of me which has already been negotiated and stamped and sealed in the new court papers, it's way sad.

But not as sad as the part of me that nobody can see that goes running out after them?

All this trouble and all this, like, *looking* for her and this is me smoothing my hair and trying to smile and twitching because I am kind of moving into the space mother's creepy tentacles because it is expected while Sam and Doris are running out.

Okay, my heart is running right out the door after them going, *Mommy, Daddy, wait!* ●

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time

i looked up
into a giant swollen sky
and wondered
if time were moving
backward now—
and i hated you
before loving you—
we broke up
long before our
first kiss—
i slipped my tongue
slowly out of your mouth—

but it's not true really—
i don't hate you—
i'm just feeling down right now,
and i'm not sure
if the universe is expanding
or contracting,
and i'm not sure
if i still love you,
or if you turned your back
before i ever looked into your eyes

—Danny Daniels

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James Patrick Kelly

THE FIRST LAW OF THERMODYNAMICS

The author tells us, " 'The First Law of Thermodynamics' is a story I've known I wanted to write ever since I graduated from Notre Dame. By the time I finally figured out how to tell it, the sixties were practically ancient history. To help put myself in the proper frame of mind, I reread Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, personal favorites that I think of as the literary equivalents of Woodstock and Altamont."

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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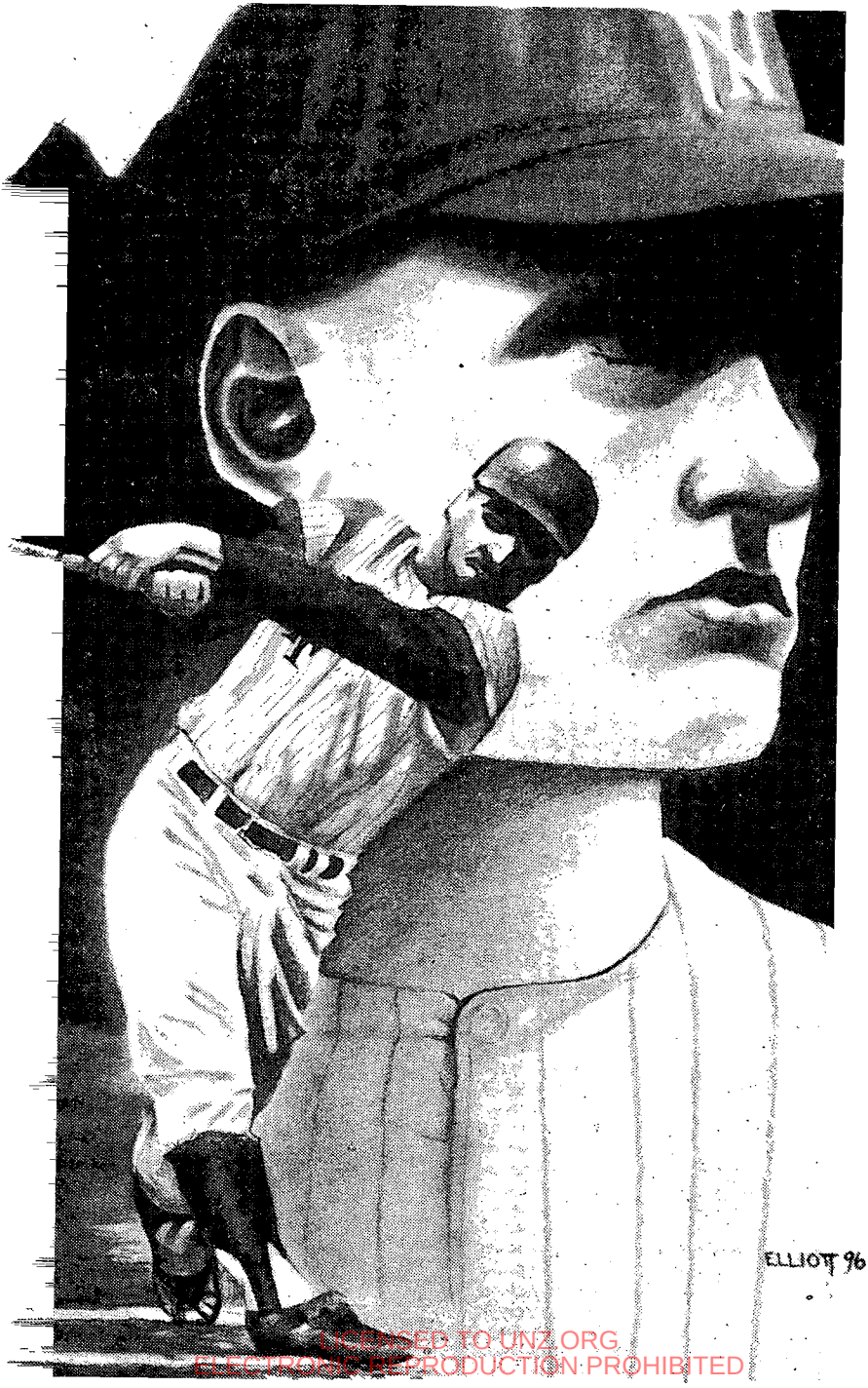

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He had dropped acid maybe a dozen times, but had never forgotten his name before. He remembered the others—Cassie, Lance, Van—even though he'd left them waiting in the parking lot—when? A couple, ten minutes ago? An hour? Up until then, the farthest out he'd ever been was in high school, when he stared through the white on a sixty watt bulb and saw the filament vibrating to a solo on Cream's "Sitting on Top of the World." It called to him in guitarese and he shrieked back. The filament said all life vibrated with a common energy, that we would exist only as long as our hearts beat to that indestructible rhythm. *Brang-brangeddy-brong, brang-brangeddy-brong!* Or something like. Actually, he might have been on mescaline the time the light bulb had played him the secret of the universe, or maybe it was Clapton, who was wailing back then like the patron saint of hallucinogens. But tonight his mind was well and truly blown by the blotter acid his new friends had called blue magic.

He wasn't particularly worried that he couldn't remember his straight name. He didn't feel at all attached to that chump at the moment, or to his dreary future. A name was nothing but a fence, closing him in. He was much happier now that the blue magic had transformed him into the wizard *Space Cowboy,* whose power was to leap all fences and zigzag through Day-Glo infinities at the speed of methamphetamine. Remembering the name on his student ID card was about as important as remembering the first law of thermodynamics. His secret identity was flunking physics and probably freshman comp too, which meant he wasn't going to last much longer at Notre Dame. And since his number in the draft lottery was fourteen, he was northbound just as soon as they booted him out of college—no way Nixon was sending *him* to Cambodia! So long, Amerika, hello Toronto. Or maybe Vancouver. New episodes in the *Adventures of Space Cowboy,* although he wasn't all that excited about picking snot icicles from his mustache. Lance said Canada would be a more happening country if it had beach front on the Gulf of Mexico.

He realized he had forgotten something else. Why had he come back to his room? Nineteen years old and his mind was already Swiss fucking cheese! He laughed at himself and then admired all the twisty little holes that were busy drilling themselves into the floor. The dull reality of the dorm emptied into them like soapy water swirling down a drain. The room reeked of Aqua Velva and Brylcreem, Balsinger's familiar weekend stink. *That's it.* Something to do with Balls, he thought. But his roommate was long since gone, no doubt sucking down quarts of Strohs while he told some Barbie doll his dream of becoming the world's most polyester dentist. Balls was the enemy; their room was divided territory, the North and South Viet Nam of Walsh Hall. Even when they were out, their stuff remained on alert. His pointy-toed boots were aimed at Balls's chukkas. Pete Townsend swung a guitar at Glen Campbell's head and

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Zap Comix blew cartoon smoke through the steamy windows of *Penthouse*. Now he remembered, sort of. He was supposed to borrow something—except the paint was melting off the walls. He picked the black cowboy hat off a pile of his dirty clothes, uncrumpled it and plunked it on. Sometimes the hat helped him think.

There was a knock. "Space?" Cassie peeked in and saw him idling at the desk. "Space, we're leaving."

It was Lance who had abridged his freak name—Lance, the wizard of words. Space didn't care; if someone he didn't like called him Space, he just played a few bars of Steve Miller's "Space Cowboy" in his head. Cassie he liked; she could call him whatever she wanted. In his opinion, Cassandra Demaras was the coolest chick who had ever gotten high. She stood almost six foxy feet tall and was wearing a man's pin-striped vest from Goodwill over a green tee shirt. Her hair was black as sin. Space lusted to see it spread across his pillow; only he knew it would never happen. She was a senior and artsy and Lance's. Not his future.

"Did you find it?" she asked.

"Ah . . . not yet," said Space cautiously. At least *someone* knew why he was here.

She stepped into the room. "Lance is going to split without you, man." Space had only joined the tribe last month and had already been left behind twice for stoned incompetence. "What's the problem?"

Her question was an itch behind his ear, so he scratched. She stared at him as if his skull were made of glass and he felt the familiar tingle of acid telepathy. She used her wizardly powers to read his mind—what there was of it—and sighed. "The key, Space. You're supposed to be looking for what's-his-face's key."

"Balls." Suddenly he was buried in a memory landslide. They had been sitting around waiting for the first rush and Lance had been laying down this rap about how they should do something about Cambodia and how some yippies at Butler had liberated the ROTC building with balloons and duct tape, and then Space had started in about how Balsinger was at school on a work-study grant and had to put in twelve hours a week pushing a broom through O'Shaughnessy Hall, the liberal arts building, *for which he had the key,* and then everybody had gotten psyched so to impress them all Space had volunteered to lift the key, except in the stairwell he had been blown away by a rush so powerful that he'd forgotten who he was and what the hell he was supposed to be doing, despite which his body had continued on to the room anyway and had been waiting here patiently for his mind to show up.

Space giggled and said, "He keeps it in the top drawer."

Cassie went to Balls's desk, opened it and then froze as if she was peering over the edge of reality.

"What's he got in there now?" he asked, "Squid?"

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As he came up behind her, he caught a telepathic burst that was like chewing aluminum foil. She was freaking out and he knew exactly why. This was where Balls kept his school supplies: a stack of blank 3x5 file cards held together with a red rubber band, scotch tape, a box of paper clips, six Number 2 pencils with pristine erasers, six Bic ball points, a slide rule, an unopened bottle of Liquid Paper, and behind, loose-leaf, graph and onionskin paper in perfect stacks. But it wasn't just Balls's stuff that had disturbed her. It was the way he had arranged everything, fitted it together with jigsaw-puzzle precision. In a world burning with love and napalm, this pinhead had taken the time to align pencils and pens, neaten stacks of paper—Space wouldn't have been surprised if he had reorganized the paper clips in their box. All this brutal order was proof that aliens from Planet Middle America had landed and were trying to pass for human! Space was used to Balsinger, but imagining the straightitude of his roommate's mind had filled Cassie with psychedelic dread.

"Space, are you as wasted as I think I am?" Her eyes had gone flat as tattoos.

"I don't know. What's the date?"

She frowned. "May 2, 1970."

"Who's President of the United States?"

"That's the problem."

He held up a fist. "How many fingers?"

She shook her head and was recaptured by the drawer.

The key to O'Shaughnessy Hall was next to the slide rule. Space picked it up and juggled it from one hand to another. It flickered through the air like a goldfish. This time when she glanced up, he bumped the drawer shut with his thigh. "Hey, remember what the dormouse said."

"No, I'm serious." She shook her head and her hair danced. "It's like time is breaking down. You know what I mean? One second doesn't connect to the next."

"Right on!" He caught the key and closed his fist around it.

"Listen! I've got to know where the peak is, or else I can't maintain. What if I just keep going up and up and up?"

"You'll have a hell of a view."

Maybe it was the wrong time for jokes. Space could see panic wisping off her like smoke. When he breathed it in, he got even higher. "Okay," he said, "so the first wave is a mother. But I'm here and you're with me, so we'll just ride it together, okay?" He surfed an open hand toward her. "Then we groove."

"You don't understand." She licked her lower lip with a strawberry tongue. "Lance has decided he wants to score again, so we can trip all weekend. He's weirding me out, Space. My brains are already oozing from my fucking ears and he's looking for the next hit."

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The blue magic was giving him a squirrely vibe; he thought he could feel a bad moon rising over this trip. Space had seen a bummer just once, back in high school, when a kid claimed he had a tiny Hitler stuck in his throat and thrashed around and drank twenty-seven glasses of water until he puked. Space had been paranoid that whatever monsters were chewing on the kid's brain would have him for dessert. But this kid—Space remembered him now—Lester Something, Lester was a pinched nobody who couldn't even tie his shoes when he was buzzed, not a wizard like Cassie or Lance or Space, with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men.

"Am I okay, Space?" She had never asked him for help before, put herself in his power. "What's going to happen to us?"

"We're going to have an adventure." Although he was worried about her, he was also turned on. He wanted to kiss his way through her hair to the pale skin on her neck. Instead he tugged at the brim of his hat. He was *Space Cowboy*. His power was that nothing could stop him, nothing could touch him. And so what if things were spinning out of control? That was the fun in doing drugs, wasn't it?

"Ready to cruise?" He beamed at her and was relieved to see his smile reflected palely on her face.

Somewhere in the future, a van honked.

"Say wonderful." Lance was giving Cassie orders.

The spooky moonlight spilled across the corn fields. Space glanced up from the floor of the van occasionally to see if the psychic ambiance had improved any, but the lunar seas still looked like mold on a slice of electric bread.

"Wonderful," she said absently.

"No, mean it."

"Won . . . der . . . ful." Cassie's voice was a chickadee fluttering against her chest. Space knew this because she was wedged between him and Lance and they had their arms around her, crossing behind her back and over her chest, protecting her from lysergic acid diethylamide demons. He could feel her blood booming; her shallow breathing fondled his ribs. The Econoline's tires drummed over seams in the pavement as its headlights unzipped the highway at sixty-five miles an hour. He found himself listening to the world with his shoulders and toes.

"Full of wonder." Lance was smooth as an apple as he talked her down; his wizard power was making words dance. "I know, that can be scary, because you don't know where you're going or what you're going to find. Strangeness probably, but so what? Life is strange, people are strange. Don't fight it, groove on it." He squeezed her and Space took his cue to do the same. "Say you're a little girl at the circus at night and a clown comes up in the dark, and it's like *holy shit,* where's Mommy? But throw some

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light on him and you're laughing." He reached to flick on the overhead light. "See?"

It was the right thing to say because she blinked in the light and smiled, sending them flashes of pink cotton candy and dancing elephants and an acrobat hanging from a trapeze by his teeth. Space could feel her come spinning down toward them like a leaf. "Wonderful," she said, focusing. "I'll try."

Space was suddenly aware that his elbow was flattening her left breast and he was clutching Lance's shoulder. He shivered, let his arm slip down and wiped his sweaty palm on his jeans.

"Heavy, man," said Van. "You want to turn the light off before I miss the turn?" Van was at the wheel of his 1962 Ford Econoline van. It had a 144-cubic-inch, six-cylinder engine and a three speed manual shift on the steering column and its name was Bozo. Van had lifted all Bozo's seats except his and replaced them with orange shag carpeting and a mattress fitted with a tie-dyed sheet. He had the Jefferson Airplane on the eight track; Grace Slick wondered if he needed somebody to love. The answer was yes, thought Space. Yes, damn it! Lance was holding Cassie's hand. Van checked the rear view mirror, then braked, pulled off the highway and drove along the shoulder, craning his head to the right. Finally he spotted an unmarked dirt track that divided a vast and unpromising nothingness in two.

"Where the fuck are we?" said Space.

"We're either making a brief incursion into Cambodia," said Van, "or we're at the ass-end of Mishawaka, Indiana." Van had the power of mobility. He and Bozo were one, a machine with a human brain. No matter how stoned the world turned, Van could navigate through it. No one demanded poetry or cosmic truths from Van; all they expected of him was to deliver.

"Looks like nowhere to me."

"To the unenlightened eye, yes," said Lance. "But check it out and you'll see another frontier of human knowledge. Tripping is like doing science, Space. You can't just lounge around your room anymore listening to Joni Mitchell and dreaming up laws of nature. You have to go out into the field and gather data in order to grok the universe. Study the stars and ponds, turn rocks over, taste the mushrooms, smoke some foliage."

"Would someone take my boots off?" said Cassie.

"It's freezing, man," said Van. "Your feet will get cold." As Bozo bumped down the track, the steering wheel kept squirming in his hands like a snake.

"I've got cold feet already."

"Science is bullshit!" said Space. "Nothing but a government conspiracy to bring us down." He slid across the shag carpet and rolled the right

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leg of Cassie's jeans over an ankle-length black boot. "Like, if they hadn't passed the law of gravity, we could all fly."

Van laughed. "Maybe we could get Dicky Trick to repeal it."

"Somebody should repeal that asshole," said Cassie.

"Science is napalm," said Space. "Science is plastic. It's Tang." He eased her boot off. She was wearing cotton socks, soft and nubbly.

"It's the bomb," said Lance.

"Are we going to the farm?" Cassie wiggled her toes in Space's hand. "This is the way to the farm, isn't it?"

Her foot reminded him of the baby rabbit that Betty McCauley had brought for show-and-tell in the sixth grade; he hadn't wanted to put it down either. He pressed his thumb gently against her instep.

"You've never been to the farm, have you, Space?" said Lance. The road spat stones at Bozo's undercarriage.

"He's home," said Van. "I can see lights, man."

"Who?" Space said.

"Do you follow baseball?" Lance started to laugh.

The farm buildings sprawled across the land like a moonbathing giant. The barrel-chested body was a Quonset hut; a red silo arm saluted the stars. The weather-bitten face of the house was turned toward them; its narrow porch pouted. There were lights in the eyes, and much more light streaming from the open slider of the Quonset. Van parked next to a '59 Studebaker Lark that had been driven to Mars and back. He opened his door, took a deep breath of the night and disappeared.

"Oh, wow!" They could hear him scrabbling on the ground. "I forget how to walk," he said.

Space was the first to reach him. Van was doing a slow backstroke across the lawn toward the house. "For a moment there, man," he said, "I could've sworn I had wheels."

"Come on, you." Lance motioned Space to grab Van's shoulders and together they tried to lift him. "Get up." It was like stacking Jell-O.

"No, no, *no*." Van giggled. "I'm too wasted."

"I'm so glad you waited until now to tell us," said Lance. "How the hell do we get back to campus?"

"Oh, I'm cool to drive, man. I just can't stand up."

They managed to fold him back into the driver's seat and Cassie slapped Big Brother into the eight track. Space glanced over to the Quonset and saw a silhouette on the canvas of light framed by the huge open doorway. For a moment a man watched—no, *sensed* him. When he sniffed the air, something feathered against Space's cheek. Then the man ghosted back into the barn.

"Old Rog doesn't seem very glad to see us," said Lance.

The barn was fiercely lit—north of supermarket bright, just south of

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noon at the beach. The wildly colored equipment seemed to shimmer in the hard light. A golden reaper, a pink cultivator, and a lobster-red baler were lined up beside a John Deere that looked like it had been painted in a tornado. The man had poked his head under its hood.

"Evening, Rog," said Lance. "Space, this is Roger Maris."

The man turned toward them; Space blinked. Roger Maris was wearing a pair of black jeans with a hole in the left knee and a greasy Yankee jersey over a gray sweatshirt. He stood maybe six feet tall and weighed a paunchy two hundred and change. He had that flattop crewcut, all right, and the nose like a thumb, but Space wasn't buying that he was Roger Maris. At least not *the* Roger Maris.

He'd been ten years old when Maris hit sixty-one home runs to break Babe Ruth's record, but in 1961 Space and his parents had been National League fans. They lived in Sheboygan and followed the Milwaukee Braves. Space's imagination had been more than filled by the heroics of Hank Aaron and Eddie Matthews; there was no room for damn Yankees. But then the Braves moved south in 1966 and Space had to accept the harsh reality that not only was God dead, but Warren Spahn was pitching in Atlanta. After that, he'd lost interest in baseball. He had no clue what had since become of *the* Roger Maris.

"Space?" Maris waved a socket wrench at him. "What the hell kind of name is Space?"

"Short for Space Cowboy," said Cassie.

Maris considered this, then put the wrench down, wiped his left hand on the pinstriped jersey and offered it to Space. "A hat don't make no cowboy," he said.

They shook. "A shirt don't make no ballplayer," said Space.

Maris's smile bandaged irritation. "What can I do you folks out of?" He gave Space a parting grip strong enough to crush stone.

"You got any more blue magic in your bag of tricks?" said Lance. "We're thinking of going away for the weekend."

"To where, Oz?" Maris shut his eyes; his lids were the color of the last olive in the jar. "Cowboy here ever done magic before?"

Now Space was annoyed; he was proud of his dope résumé. "I've dropped Owsley, wedding bells, and some two way brown dot."

"Practically Ken Kesey." Cassie laughed. "And only a freshman."

"That shit's just acid," said Maris. "Magic goes deeper."

"He handled the first rush all right," said Lance. "We all did."

"You driving around with a head full of blue magic?" Maris frowned.

"Actually," said Lance, "Van's driving."

But Maris wasn't listening. He had closed his eyes again and kept them closed, his head cocked to one side as he received secret instructions from outer space. "It's your funeral," he said abruptly, and strode from the barn as if he'd just remembered he'd left the bath water running.

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"I guess we scored." Lance shrugged. "Hey Rog, wait up!" He paused at the door of the Quonset, glanced uncertainly at Cassie and Space and then plunged after Maris.

"What does he mean, our funeral?" Cassie had turned the color of a Saltine.

"Don't ask me; I'm the rookie. Can't you see these training wheels on my head?"

"Deeper? Deeper than what?"

Space put his arm around her shoulder and led her from the Quonset into the baleful night.

Pacing Roger Maris's front parlor, Space remembered what Cassie had said about things getting disconnected. How could anyone deal acid and live in a place as square as a doctor's waiting room? The wallpaper was Midwestern Hideous: golden, flag-bearing eagles flapped between Civil War cannons on a cream field. If he stared long enough, the blue magic animated the pattern for him. Madness, *madness*—and Norman Mailer wondered why we were in Viet Nam! Lance and Cassie waited for Maris on a long, low, brown couch in front of an oval rug braided in harvest colors. Cassie watched the brick fireplace in which four dusty birch logs were stacked. Nearby, a television the size of a Shetland pony was tethered to the wall socket.

Space couldn't stand still. "Where did you dig this loon up?"

"He found us." Lance shot a quizzical look at Cassie. "After the Santana concert?"

She bit her lip and said, "Don't talk to me. I'm not here."

"Okay." Lance was teeth-grindingly patient. "That's cool."

By the door, a heavy brass pot was filled by a man's black umbrella and three baseball bats. "I mean, check this room," said Space.

Lance laughed. "I keep expecting Wally Cleaver to materialize and ask if I want to sniff some glue."

On waist-high shelves beside a rocking chair were stacked a build-it-yourself Heathkit tuner, amp, and turntable. Next to them was a rack of LPs. Space worried through them; they contradicted *everything* in the room. Maris had the rare nude version of John and Yoko's *Two Virgins, Weasels Ripped My Flesh* by the Mothers of Invention, Moby Grape, everything by Quicksilver Messenger Service, Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde,* the Airplane's *Surrealistic Pillow.*

"Look at this!" Space waved a copy of *Workingman's Dead* at Lance. "This is *not* Roger Maris—he's not anyone. His pieces don't fit together."

Lance pointed silently at a framed Western Union telegram that hung beside a painting of Guernseys.

MY HEARTIEST CONGRATULATIONS TO YOU ON HITTING YOUR 61ST HOME RUN. THE AMERICAN PEOPLE WILL ALWAYS

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ADMIRE A MAN WHO OVERCOMES GREAT PRESSURE TO ACHIEVE AN OUTSTANDING GOAL.
JOHN F. KENNEDY.

"So?" Space didn't know why it had become so important to him that this clyde wasn't the famous ballplayer. "He could've got this anywhere—could've sent it to himself." Everything seemed so slippery all of a sudden; he felt a familiar twinge of dread. Just when he'd finally figured the world out, he was afraid he might have to stop believing in something. Again. This was exactly how it had felt when he'd given up on baseball, Catholicism, America, love, Star Trek, college. What was it this time? The only illusions he had left were that nothing mattered, that acid was wisdom and that he was a wizard.

He heard Maris on the stairs and skittered back to the couch next to Cassie, who was still elsewhere.

"A dozen hits of magic." Maris offered them a plastic baggie with a scatter of confetti clinging to the inside. Space took it. Each blotter was the size of a fingernail and was labeled with a blue ∞. "Sixty," said Maris.

Lance pulled two twenties and a joint from his tee shirt pocket. "Want to smoke?" He liked to close deals with some ceremonial pot. He said it was the Indian way, and also helped detect narcs. While he lit up, Space counted out a ten, a five and five ones and put an empty wallet back in his jeans.

Lance passed the joint to Maris, who took an impatient toke.

"You said this is deeper than acid." Space jiggled the baggie. "What's that supposed to mean, anyway?"

Cassie twitched and returned from the dark side of the moon.

"You take a trip, you come back, nothing really changes." The smoky words curled out of his mouth. "This shit makes you become yourself faster, kind of hurries things along."

"Something wrong with that?" said Cassie.

"Depends on who you're supposed to be." Maris tucked the wad of money into his jeans. "But if I was you kids, I'd take the long way to the future." He offered her the joint; she waved it over to Space.

"Sounds like Timothy Leary bullshit to me." Space took a deep, disgusted pull and immediately regretted it. Lance's pot tasted like electrical fire; it was probably laced with Mr. Clean.

"Timothy Leary's dead," said Lance. "At least according to the Moody Blues. So if I'm not myself, who am I? Marshall McLuhan? Abbie Hoffman?"

"You're faking it, that's what being young is all about. When you're young, there ain't all that much of you, so you pretend there's more."

"Hell, you're the one preten . . ." Space couldn't hold it in anymore; he was racked by a fit of coughing.

"Space," said Cassie.

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"You never hit sixty-one homers." Space gasped; his head felt like it was filling with helium. "I bet you've never even been to Yankee Stadium."

Maris's face was hard as the Bible. "You want to see my license, Cowboy?" In the uneasy silence, he fetched an ashtray from the hi-fi shelf. "Me, I stayed young a long time, mostly because I never did nothing but play ball. Growing up ain't something they really encourage in the bigs. When I got traded to the Yankees, I was just the kid who was going to play right field next to Mantle. I was MVP that season. '60." Talking about baseball seemed to calm him. He took another drag, ashed the joint and then offered it again to Cassie.

"Mantle?" This time she puffed politely.

"Mickey Mantle played center field," said Lance. "Tell them about the home run." Space wasn't sure whether Lance really believed or was egging Maris on for a goof.

"That was the next year, when me and Mick hit all the homers. Only he got sick and I still didn't have the record on the last day of the season. We were playing the Red Sox at the Stadium. By then a lot of people had given up, probably thought I didn't have sixty-one in me. I remember it was a cool day but real bright, the sun beating down on all the empty seats. The fans who showed were jammed into the right field stands, just in case. The Sox started Tracy Stallard, a righty, fastball pitcher. I flied out to Yaz in the first but when I came up in the fourth . . ."

The contours of his body changed, as if the weight of the last nine years had fallen away.

"He started me with two balls away. Then the third pitch, he made a mistake, got too much of the plate. I was always a mistake hitter. I got a real good cut at it and then . . . I just stood and watched. It landed near the bullpen, about ten rows into the stands, people scrambling after it. There was a fog of noise; it was like I couldn't find my way around the bases. When I got back to the dugout, Blanchard and Skowron and Lopez wouldn't let me in, they were blocking the top step, making me go back out into the noise. That was the problem, I couldn't never find my way out of that god-damned noise."

"Is that why you left baseball?" asked Cassie

"Nah." Maris closed his eyes again; he was definitely listening to *something*. "Nah, it's 'cause I ain't a kid anymore." Suddenly he looked spent; Space could see a looseness under the chin. "I'm thirty-six years old."

"That's still pretty young," said Cassie.

"Well then, there's this." He rolled up the gray sweatshirt, uncovering his left forearm. A scar, smooth and white as the belly of a snake, sliced from the ball of his thumb up toward the elbow. "The VC likes to rig these homemade mines, see. Couple of fragmentation grenades with the spoons attached to a tripwire. Me and Luther Nesson were walking point outside of Da Lat and the poor bastard stepped into one. Died in a splatter and

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left me a souvenir. A chunk of shrapnel chewed on my palmaris longus muscle and severed a couple of tendons."

Space contemplated the wound with vast relief; for a moment back there, Maris had almost convinced him. Now he felt a grudging admiration for Maris's creativity, his devotion to detail, the weight of his portrayal—the man had elevated *lunacy* to an *art*. And of course the Nam angle made it all the more poignant. Space imagined that, if he had seen what Maris had seen, he might well be strumming a ukulele and warbling like Tiny Tim.

"Bummer." Lance stubbed the roach out and took the baggie. "Hey, we better go check on Van, make sure he didn't float away." He stood. "So anyway, thanks, man." He reached for Cassie's hand.

"What's happening?" Cassie scooted away from him and bumped into Space. "We're going already? What about the rest of the story?"

Maris waved at the parlor. "Sister, you're looking at it."

Outside, Van was amusing himself by flashing a light show against the side of the farmhouse while he sang along to *Sergeant Pepper*. *High beam-low beam-right blinker-off-low beam-left blinker*. ". . . *Lucy* in the *Sky* with *Diamonds*." He had a voice like a loose fan belt.

Maris followed them onto the porch and watched, flickering in the headlights. As Cassie ducked into Bozo, Maris called out. "Cowboy! How much you want for the hat?"

"Huh?"

"Pay no attention," Lance hissed. "Just get in."

"It's not for sale." Space stepped away from Bozo.

"Sixty bucks says it is."

Space tugged at the brim; he had almost forgotten he was wearing it. He started back toward Maris. It wasn't much of a hat—Space had stepped on it many times, spilled Boone's Farm Apple Wine on it, watched as one of Lenny Kemmer's Winstons had burned a hole in the black felt crown. "Is this some kind of joke?"

Van killed the lights and Beatles. Lance and Cassie deployed on either side of Bozo.

Maris came to the top of the porch steps. "You got doubts," he said. "You think I've been shitting you all night."

When Space tried to deny it, his tongue turned to peanut butter.

"Hell, Cowboy, you don't believe in nothing."

"So?"

"So I want to buy the hat." Maris came down the first step. "For an experiment." Second step. "And you gotta help." Bottom step. "Sixty." He unfolded the wad of bills and thrust them at Space.

"Hey, Rog," said Lance. "He's just a kid. Leave him alone."

Abraham Lincoln gazed up at Space, appraising the quality of his courage.

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"What kind of experiment?" said Cassie.

"Scientific. Cowboy and me are going to measure something."

Space nipped the money without speaking and offered Maris the hat.

Maris clapped him on the shoulder. "You just hold onto that for now." He turned Space toward the Quonset. "See that barn? How far would you say it is?"

As Space peered into night, the Quonset receded and then flowed back toward him. "I don't know. Fifty, sixty feet?"

"More like a hundred, but that's okay. Now you're gonna stand in that doorway and get a good tight grip on the brim." He raised Space's arm. "Hold it to one side, just like that. Arm's length."

"Space." Cassie slipped between them. "Give him back his money and let's get out of here."

Maris brushed past her and surveyed the shrubbery along the porch. He poked by a couple of crewcut yews, a rhododendron in bud, a forsythia already gone by.

Cassie kept insisting. "Time to *go,* man." Like she was his mother.

The edge of the garden was defined by a row of smooth beach stones, painted white. Maris knelt with a grunt and hefted one the size of a peach, only flatter and more egg-shaped.

"Everyone remembers me for the homers, but I could play the field too." He brushed dirt off the stone. "Won a Gold Glove, you know. Didn't nobody stretch a single on Roger Maris."

"Jesus God," said Cassie, "what are you morons trying to prove? That your balls are bigger than your brains?"

That summed it up nicely, thought Space. Maris was playing a testosterone game with his head. Space was at once a creature of the game and a spectator. A poor nervous physics major sat in the stands, watching in horror, while Space Cowboy was grooving on a Grade A adrenaline high. And why not? He was a nineteen-year-old wizard whose power was that nothing could touch him, nothing could stop him. He looked over at Lance, who was pale as the moon. "Right *on!*" Space said.

He counted the paces off : *thirty-nine, forty, forty-one.* Forty-two to the Quonset's open doorway—figure three feet to a pace, so let's see, three times two was six and three times four was twelve—was that right? He had won his high school's Math Medal back in the Pleistocene. A hundred and twenty-six feet was just about the distance from third base to first. He bowed, flourished the hat to Cassie and then held it up in his moist, outstretched hand.

Maris turned at a right angle to the Quonset; he held the stone behind him, just off the hip. He scowled at the hat over his front shoulder and then paused. He shut his eyes and listened to the howl of the Dog Star long enough for a bead of sweat to dribble from Space's arm pit. Then Maris nodded, reared back and strode quickly forward—*open your eyes,*

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goddamnit! His arm snapped past his ear and the stone came screaming at Space like the headlamp of God's own Harley—or maybe it was Space who screamed, he couldn't tell, he couldn't move, his entire future had collapsed into an egg-shaped stone and time stopped and for an eternity he thought *what a fucking waste* and then time resumed with a sneeze and the hat spun him halfway around but he held on to it and something *thwocked* against the concrete floor of the Quonset and again, *thwocka-thwocka-thwok!* For a moment there was utter silence, which drummed in his ears like the finale of the *1812 Overture*. Space whispered, "Out of sight," and giggled. Then he shouted so the others could hear. "OUT OF SIGHT!"

Space was surprised that the stone hadn't ripped off the top of the hat but instead had come through the pinch on the front side, leaving a hole big enough for Lance to put his fist through. Lance handed it to Van who offered it to Cassie who wanted no part of it. "Are you boys about through?" Her voice was a fistful of nails.

"Yeah," said Lance. "Time to cruise."

Van brought the hat to Maris, who was kneading his biceps. Maris stared right through him. "See what magic can do, Cowboy?" His smile had no teeth in it. "You can make yourself into a star, if that's who you're supposed to be."

"Mr. Maris," said Space, opening his wallet. "How much for that hat?"

Van, Space, and Lance staggered out of Kresge's and across the parking lot, laughing. The cashier had rung up the eight cans of Rust-Oleum—two each of red, yellow, green, and black—the one pound bag of Fritos, the four Almond Joys, the six packages of Fun Tyme Balloons, the dozen rolls of crepe ribbon, the two packs of Teaberry gum and then, as the register stuck out its paper tongue at her, she had asked them who the party was for. When Lance had said, "President Nixon, ma'am," she was so transparently croggled that it was all Space could do to keep from dropping to his belly and barking like a seal.

Cassie, who had been waiting for them in Bozo, didn't see what was so funny, but then she hadn't eaten that second blotter of blue magic, either. Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters had a saying: you were either on the bus or off. Space was no telepath, but it occurred to him that Cassie might be about to stand up and pull the signal cord for her stop.

"She's probably calling the cops on us right now," Cassie said.

"For what, indecent composure?" said Lance. "Chortling in a No Humor Zone?"

"How about possession? You've got Space here mooning around in a cowboy hat with a frontal lobotomy and you two are so wasted you're tripping over gum spots on the parking lot." She shook her head. "You guys are dangerous, you know that?"

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"Only to ourselves." Van swerved Bozo around an oncoming Vega and roared onto the highway, headed back toward campus. "Break out the chips."

They crunched to themselves for a few moments. Space was glad that Cassie was no longer freaking out, only now she had turned so fucking sensible that she was stretching his nerves. They were tripping, *ferchrissakes*; this was no time to be responsible. "How about some tunes?" he said.

Van turned on the radio.

. . . of student protests continued today in the wake of President Nixon's decision to send troops into Cambodia. In Maryland, Governor Marvin Mandel has put the National Guard on alert after two days of unrest on the campus. . . .

"I said tunes!" Space leaned forward to punch a selector button.

"Ssh, listen." Lance yanked him back.

And at Kent State University in Ohio, a fire of undetermined origin swept through the ROTC building this evening. Firemen responding to the blaze were hampered by students throwing rocks and cutting hoses.

"Hey, man," said Van. "Maybe we should go after ROTC too."

Earlier today, a group of two thousand students marched through downtown Kent, prompting local officials to order a dawn-to-dusk . . .

"No," Lance said. "That's where they'll be expecting trouble. Besides, we've got the key to O'Shag."

"This whole gig is bogus." Cassie nudged the paper Kresge sack with her boot. "It's not going to accomplish anything, except maybe get us arrested."

"Hey, we're going to wake up this fucking campus," Space said.

"Fucking ay!" said Van.

"Shake the jocks out of their beds."

"Right on, man, right on!" Van pumped his fist.

"Light a fire under old Hesburgh."

"Tell it, brother!" Van leaned on the horn.

"Lay off, you guys," said Lance. "Cassie, you heard the radio. People all over the country are protesting. We've got a chance to make a statement here."

"With balloons and spray paint?"

"Better than guns and bombs." Lance rested his hand on her knee. "You thought it was cool before."

"That wasn't me, that was the acid."

Turning to sports, Dust Commander has won the Kentucky Derby. A fifteen-to-one shot. . . .

She rested her cheek against the window. "Look, I'm going to graduate in a couple of weeks. I'm too old to be playing Wendy to your Lost Boys. Maybe I should just go back to the dorm and crash."

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And in the American League, the Angels beat the Red Sox, 8-4, it was the Yankees 7, the Brewers 6. . . .

Space fingered the hole in his hat and wondered if he had it in him to be a star.

Van sauntered toward the main entrance to O'Shaughnessy Hall. The liberal arts building was one of the largest and ugliest on campus, a stack of four Gothic Revival ice cube trays with a yellow brick veneer. Cassie, Space, and Lance watched from the chill shadows as Van waltzed innocently up to the door, tried it as if he'd expected O'Shag to be open at 11:34 on a Saturday night, shrugged and cruised on.

"Of course, if it wasn't locked, we wouldn't be breaking and entering." Cassie made no effort to keep her voice down. "Jerry Rubin would have to take points off."

Lance had used his wizard power to talk Cassie into sticking with them, but Space wasn't sure it had been his swiftest move of the evening. Doubt was contagious, especially when your feet were wet. They had left Bozo in student parking and stolen across the tidy greens of the campus, weighting their shoes with spring dew. The night was getting colder; Space could see his breath plume. He ground his teeth to keep them from chattering. It took Van forever to circle back to them.

They slunk around to O'Shag's smaller north entrance, checking for any signs of activity inside. The classrooms were all dark but that didn't mean some English professor might not be late-nighting in one of the windowless offices, slugging Jim Beam and writing poems about English professors for the *Dead Tree Review*. This time the others stayed behind while Space approached the door, clutching Balls's key. It wasn't until he was fitting it into the lock that he realized there might be an alarm. He looked back at the others in a panic but they were no help. Neither were the stars, some of which were flashing blue like the cherry on a cop car. He could almost hear the Pleiades shrilling at him as he tried to turn the key to the right. It wouldn't budge. He thought the moon's alarm would sound deeper and more reproachful, like a fog horn. He turned the key left and the dead bolt clicked. *Moon, spoon, you fucking loon.* He pushed against the door and it swung open, dumping him into O'Shaughnessy Hall.

He went through a dimly lit stairwell to the long, dark hall of the first floor. The block walls on either side were pierced by wooden doors. Space could not make out the far end. Although he had passed this way every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for eight months, Space felt lost. The place he knew and hated teemed with sound and light and bodies. This one was empty, silent as a dream and all the doors were closed, creating an odd pressure in the hall, as if the building were holding its breath.

He heard a door tick open, a squeak of sneakers against the rubber

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mat in the stairwell, the whisper of corduroy pants. Lance said that the reason Van always wore corduroys was that he needed more texture in his life.

"In here," said Space.

"No lights?" Van peered.

"No."

They joined Lance and Cassie in the stairwell. Lance knelt in a corner of the stairwell and handed out supplies from the Kresge bag. "We'll each take a floor," he said. "Fifteen minutes and out."

"But what should we say, man?" asked Van.

"Like I said, just make a statement," said Lance. "It's your life and their war."

Cassie waved off a package of balloons. "Keep the party favors." She went up the stairs with a can of Rust-Oleum in each hand.

"Bring the empties back and no fingerprints, okay?" said Lance. "Fifteen minutes—let's do it!" He and Van took the stairs two at a time.

Space sprayed a blue peace sign on the door to Room 160 but was strangely unconvinced by it. Then what kind of statement did he have in him? He immediately regretted the *fuck Nixon*; it was obvious as air. *Hell no, we won't go* sprawled the entire length of Room 149 and came to a disappointing conclusion on 147. Room 141 read *Out now*. He took a balloon from his pocket, blew it up and almost fainted but managed to hold it pinched between thumb and forefinger. Out of where? Cambodia? Viet Nam? Notre Dame? Instead of tying the balloon, Space let it go and it leapt, hissing, from his hand. He wrote *revolution* on the east wall, *make love not war* on the west, then left them to futile debate. He was now deep into the hall; the visibility was less than a class in either direction. He could feel the future watching as he wrote *acid test* on Room 133. Pale secondhand moonlight glimmered through the tall wire-reinforced glass slits in each door. 125 said, *God is dead.* Long red runs dribbled from the *"o"* in *God,* like blood from the crown of thorns. Was proclaiming the demise of the deity a political statement? *Maris 61/61* on 117. That would leave the campus fuzz scratching their balls even though Old Rog had proved that it was cool to *talk the talk,* man, just as long as you can *walk the walk.* But Space still couldn't see the end of the fucking hall.

At that moment, something splatted on his cheek. Space swiped at it, thinking it might be his own sweat. The finger came away dry; he could feel his skin tighten in fear. *Pa-chuk.*

"Hey!"

Pa-chuk, pa-chuk. The two drops hit his left arm like marbles on a snare drum and he spun wildly away. *Pa-chuk.* Space moaned and started to run. A phantom storm in the middle of O'Shaugnessey Hall was hairy enough, but these weren't just polite raindrops. They were big and cold and rude as eggs. *Pa-chuk.*

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And this was it, he realized: the bummer he had helped Cassie dodge was seething all around him and he knew he had to get out, get *out,* that he had been wandering blindly and without purpose down this hallway ever since he had come to Notre Dame *papa-chuk* but he could no longer go back to his parents and Sheboygan and Cathy, that lying bitch *pa-chuk* but there was no sense in going any farther because the hallway stretched on to some distant and unknowable infinity and besides, he had to get the hell out, which was when the doors began to vibrate and the light of insight came knifing through the long, thin windows and he saw the hall with the same acid clarity with which he had heard the filament of a sixty watt bulb riffing about the mysterious energy that abided in all life, only now he could sense a new secret *papa-chuk*: that there was no future in wandering down an empty hall, that in order to find his life he would have to choose where to expend his energy. Pick a door, *damn it.* Room 110 was right in front of him but it was even and Space knew he had to be odd. He about-faced; nothing could stop him. The doorknob of 109 was warm as a kiss.

Space put a hand to his forehead to shield his eyes. Sunlight poured through windows which framed snow-covered mountains. The sky was the blue of heaven; the snow on the ground glistened. He had entered a classroom all right, but it obviously wasn't in the same corner of reality as South Bend, Indiana.

A balding man stood behind the head desk and typed with two fingers —the teacher, Space assumed. He was wearing suede cowboy boots, black pants, a denim work shirt buttoned to the neck and—*holy shit,* the dude had a gold earring!

He did not seem to notice Space.

Neither did the students now filing in behind him. They seemed too young to be in college; they had that stunned glaze of high school seniors—except that some of them had tattoos. The sides of one girl's head had been shaved to a gunmetal shadow. A boy in a flannel shirt had on the flimsiest headphones Space had ever seen; they were attached to a transistor radio hooked to the kid's belt. *Walkman*—the word sprang unbidden to his mind. *Walk the walk,* man.

Space's first instinct was to bolt from the room, or at least slouch like a student behind a desk in the back, but instead he approached the teacher. As he got closer he saw that the squashed typewriter had no paper in it, that it wasn't any kind of machine Space had ever seen before, but then there was another strange word melting on his tongue like a lifesaver—*laptop.* It was a funny word and he might have laughed, except that he had by now come too close to the teacher, close enough so that he could wiggle his toes inside the man's boots, so close that he could jingle the keys to an '88 Dodge Caravan in his front pants pocket and, in the back pocket, feel the bulk of a wallet not-quite-filled with thirty-eight dol-

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lars and a NatWest Visa card with an unpaid balance of $3,734.80 on which he was paying a 9.9% APR and a California driver's license and a picture of a pretty little blonde girl named Kaitlin, so impossibly close that he could feel the weight of a single gold band around the fourth finger of his left hand and remember Judy's breath feathering against his neck after she kissed him goodbye that morning.

The bell rang and the class came to what passed for attention at Memorial High.

"Good morning, people." He turned to the board and scrawled, *1st law of thermodynamics* in handwriting that was almost as legible as an EKG scan. He faced the class again. "Can anyone tell me what this is?"

He was astonished to see Ben Strock with his hand up. Most days the kid sat looking as if he had just been hit in the head with a shovel, even though he *was* pulling down a B+. "Yes, Ben?"

"Uh . . . bathroom pass, Mr. Casten."

Jack Casten waved him from the room. "Anyone else?"

Of course, Feodor Papachuk raised his hand. *Fucking suck-up*, thought the part of Jack Casten that was still Space Cowboy and always would be. "Go ahead, Feodor."

"The first law of thermodynamics," said Feodor Papachuk, "is that energy can neither be created nor destroyed, but may be changed from one form to another." ●

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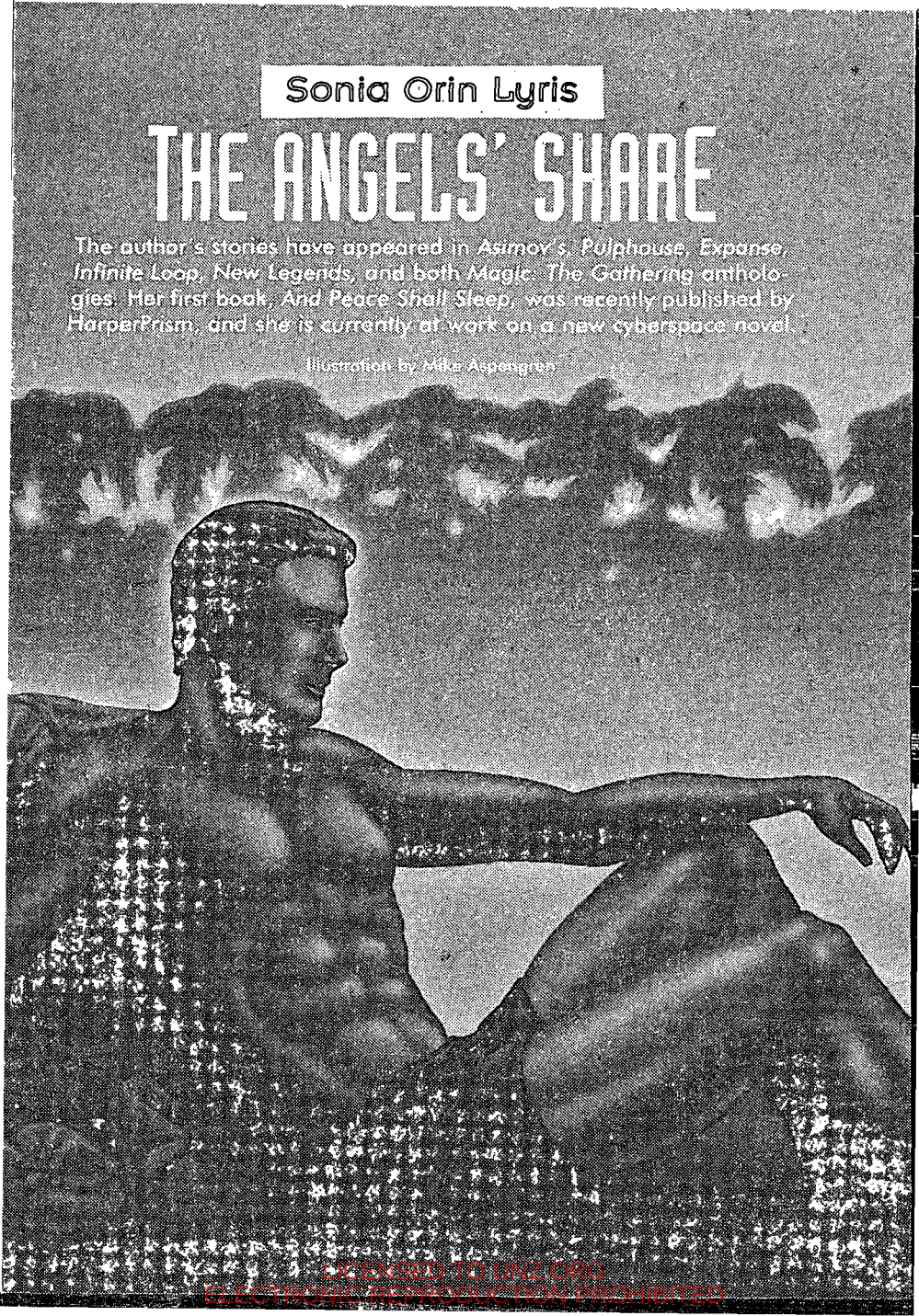
Sonia Orin Lyris

THE ANGELS' SHARE

The author's stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Pulphouse*, *Expanse*, *Infinite Loop*, *New Legends*, and both *Magic: The Gathering* anthologies. Her first book, *And Peace Shall Sleep*, was recently published by HarperPrism, and she is currently at work on a new cyberspace novel.

Illustration by Mike Aspengren



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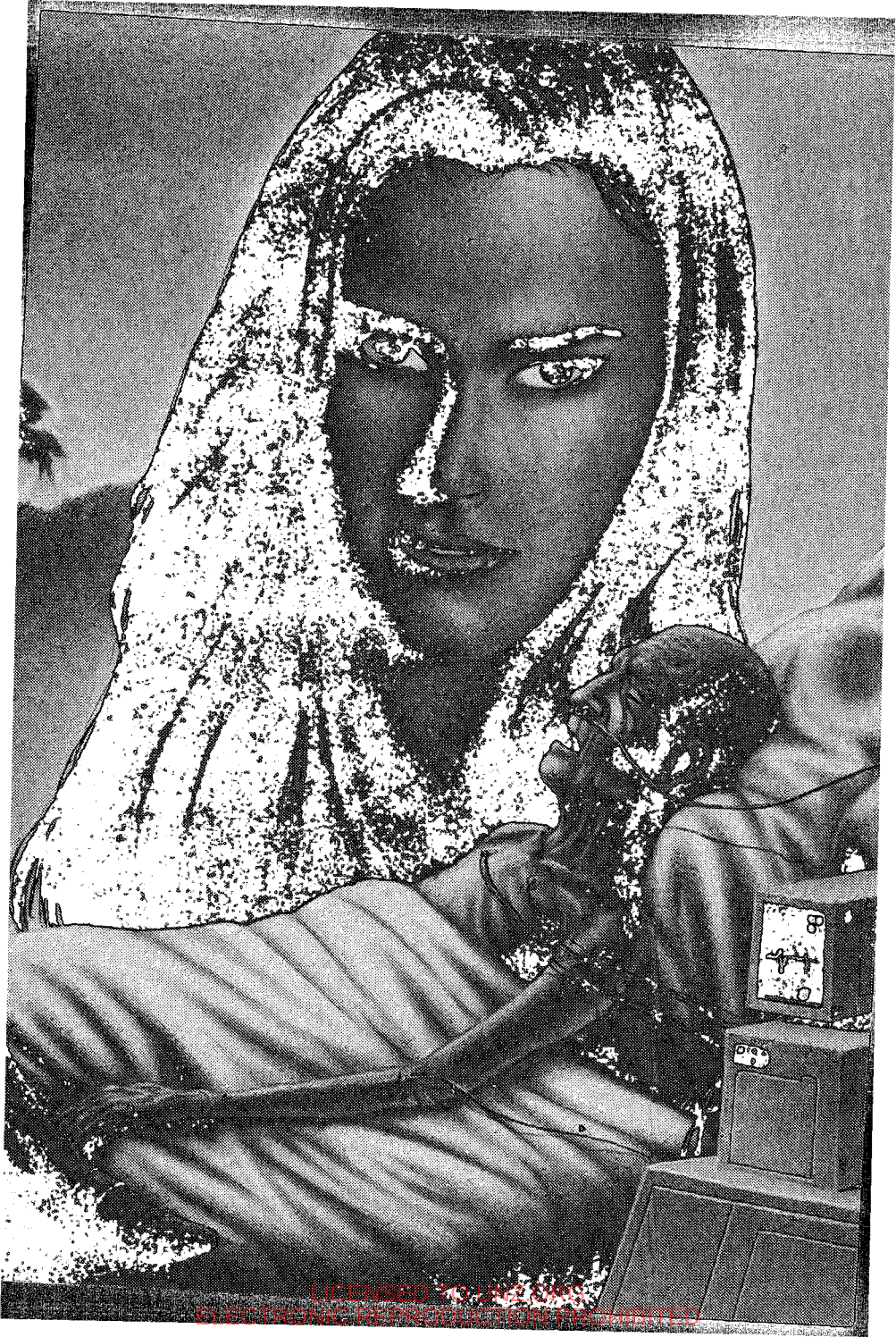

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Phantom watched Owl from the far end of the pool. The other man stood on the diving board, his wet, coffee-colored skin accenting his toned, muscular body. Owl bounced a little, testing the spring of the board.

Even if Owl had ever been as good a diver as he claimed, it would have to have been at least fifty years ago, long before the recent fall that broke Owl's fragile hip, forcing the old man to surgery and rehab. However good Owl might have been then, it was long ago, when Owl had been in his own body.

So Phantom watched from the other end of the pool.

Owl was grinning in obvious pleasure. Phantom understood: the other man had only been here a week, and Phantom knew well how the sudden lack of pain could make you feel reborn.

The board went down deep a few times, then snapped up as Owl launched himself into the air, tucked into a ball, and spun above the pool. At the last moment he uncurled and sliced into the water.

In a moment, a fuzzy black head popped up next to Phantom.

"God, this is wonderful," Owl said, shaking the water from his head.

Phantom chuckled. "Almost as good as the original, eh?"

Owl's smile faded. "No."

"It never is," Phantom said softly.

It was a sunny day in Paradise. But then, this near the equator, the weather was usually warm and often sunny. They paid for the weather, like they paid for the Olympic-size swimming pool, tennis courts, world-class chefs, and the razor wire atop the high walls.

It was all part of the Paradise package, and the package cost. But then, three months in a young, handsome athletic body was bound to be pricey. Three months of relief while someone else took over the rehab of your broken body. It didn't come cheap.

"This your first time?" Phantom asked Owl.

Owl nodded. "And you?"

"I was here last year."

"Huh." Owl was obviously impressed. Body swaps were limited to one a year, if you could afford it.

The year limit was for the same reason that the swap started to deteriorate after three months; too much of having another consciousness mapped onto your brain and the brain started to abandon connections. Phantom knew about it; his company had pursued its own research and he had seen the tests on monkeys. By five months the monkeys were unable to feed themselves, and when attempts were made to transfer the original consciousness back, the monkeys threw themselves at the bars of the cages until they smashed their heads into bloody unconsciousness.

The fact was that a single trip to Paradise cost more than most people

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would see in a lifetime. Wealth alone was not enough to get you in; Paradise only provided transfers to those who would medically benefit, and whose original bodies were likely to survive the three months.

"So," Owl said, drawing out the question with a wave of his hand, "what brings you to Paradise?"

"Chemotherapy," Phantom said, smiling hard into Owl's questioning face.

"Ah," Owl said, looking down.

"Probably be my last visit," Phantom added, still smiling. "Too bad it's only three months, eh?"

Owl gave Phantom a quick, sharp glance which Phantom pointedly ignored.

"There." Phantom pointed at two women. In a single swift movement that he could never have done in his own body, even when he was this young, Phantom put his hands on the edge of the pool and lifted himself out. Owl followed him up and they stood together like a couple of dripping Adonises.

The two women had just stepped out of the offices. They stood on the tiled path, blinking in the hot sun.

"New," Phantom said softly to Owl.

The women walked down the path, each carrying a suitcase with the Paradise logo, which would be filled with the clothes the host had picked out before the body swap.

"New," Owl echoed with a sly grin. "You thinking of making a friend or two, Phantom?"

The women were exquisite, of course. With the wealth that came through Paradise, Paradise hosts had to be the best. That, after all, was part of the draw.

The first woman was dark haired, and dark eyed, an olive green silk dress flattering her slender figure. She had an exotic look, probably due to an Asian grandparent. She walked lightly, as though she was afraid she might break. Probably recovering from an accident. The second woman was small and compact, muscled like a swimmer. She had large blue eyes and a mane of hair the color of orange flame that fell past the shoulders of her yellow sun dress.

Phantom chuckled. "Carrot Top's a fatty."

There were a lot of reasons to come to Paradise, but basically it was about having someone else do your dirty work for you. You hired a host to do rehab after an accident, or take the painful chemo treatments that were your last stab at life. Or maybe you hired someone to repair the damage you had done to yourself.

"You mean she's here to lose weight?" Owl laughed. "How can you tell?"

"I'm a businessman, Owl. You don't build a successful business on

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products, you build it on people. I've spent a lot of years watching people. And my business is very successful."

The two women had probably gone through the transfer process last night. They would already have slept in their new bodies for one evening and this morning white-clad angels—the Paradise staff—would lead them through two hours of "get acquainted" exercises. The new body would have none of the problems of the old, so it wouldn't take long to get comfortable enough in the new body that it felt like you belonged there.

Going back, of course, was a bitch.

Paradise clients didn't get a choice about that, though. The three month limit wasn't just the way the contract was worded; the technology could not make the transfer last longer. After three months the transfer started to deteriorate as both host and client bodies "rejected" the new brain mapping, and hence the consciousness that inhabited the body. Another month without returning both inhabitants to their original bodies and both client and host would be vegetables.

When faced with that eventuality, most people would willingly—if reluctantly—return to their own bodies. Paradise depended on it.

"Look at the way Carrot Top moves," Phantom said to Owl. "Her half-shuffle. Hesitation in each step. She's used to being in a much larger body. Two hundred pounds, at least. It'll take her longer to adjust to the host body because of her self-image. I bet she puts twenty pounds on that body before she leaves Paradise."

"What a way to diet."

"What a goddamn waste," Phantom said. "Her host will starve and exercise for three months, then Carrot will go and put all the fat right back on again."

"Don't have much faith in human nature, do you?"

"Just enough faith, Owl."

Phantom grabbed a towel from a pile and started to dry his legs off. The sight of his leg momentarily took him by surprise. Even after four weeks in Paradise, he was still startled when he saw a piece of his body, young and healthy.

Mirrors were scarce here. Paradise didn't want to encourage clients to become too attached to their host bodies. At the same time, clients paid for the privilege of being perfect, even if just for three months, so by the pool there were mirrors.

Phantom admired his image. The angels matched coloring between host and client, but the sandy brown hair and pale green eyes were all that his original body had in common with his host's body. His host was good-looking enough to be a model or an actor. Instead he rented his body to wealthy men with damaged bodies.

Phantom didn't envy his host right now. The fellow would be enduring

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the worst of the course of chemotherapy Phantom's body was due to receive this time around.

Of course, his host only had to rent his body out a few times, do his part to rehab the client, and he could retire in luxurious comfort. Unpleasant as a host's job might be, there was no shortage of hosts.

Or clients.

Phantom chuckled. "Yes," he said to Owl as the women passed by, "a new friend might be just the thing."

Phantom followed the red-headed woman. He was careful not to be obvious, but the effort was probably wasted. She seemed dazed.

Newcomers often were. The shock of being in a new body, one that was not sick, or—in this case—not fat, was startling.

He watched her walk to her room, noted the number, and went back to his own. He showered, and changed into a T-shirt, jeans, and sandals and returned to the red-head's room.

She would probably still be inside, wrapped in uncertainty about venturing out. He knocked. After a moment she opened the door.

"Welcome to Paradise," Phantom said. "May I come in?"

She looked startled and stepped back.

Good looks, Phantom had discovered, were much better than lock picks. She clearly was not used to handsome men taking an interest in her. He stepped inside, shut the door behind him, and gave her a winning smile.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"The welcoming committee. You can call me Phantom."

He stepped up very close to her and touched her face very lightly, tracing the line of her jaw. She stood there, frozen.

"Phantom is just my nickname," he continued. "Most people use nicknames to protect their privacy while they're in Paradise. And I've got a nickname for you. Carrot Top, for that amazing hair."

"I don't think we're supposed to be—" she said, her hands hanging limply at her sides, her face tight with uncertainty—and something else. Hope, it looked like.

"You're a good girl, aren't you." Phantom continued to outline her face, moving to her ears. "The angels told you no sex and you believed them."

She inhaled. Soft, but he heard it.

"Well, let me tell you something else, Carrot." He pulled his hand away from her face suddenly, to get all of her attention. It worked; her eyes focused on him and she caught her breath.

"These bodies they gave us," he said, "they're disease free. No venereal diseases. All the men are sterile. So you see, they say 'no,' but they really mean 'have fun.' "

He put his hands on her shoulders. Her muscles relaxed a little under

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his fingers, telling him that her instinct was not to resist. He pushed her gently toward the bed and she took a clumsy step backward.

"So let's have some fun," he said.

Her hands floated up between them as though they were looking in vain for something to push against.

"No," she said. "I—"

He pulled his hands back. "You want me to stop, Carrot?"

"I—" she trailed off.

"I'll stop if you like," he said, smiling. "I'll leave. Is that what you want? Just say so."

Her eyes betrayed a mix of emotions, a warring of insecurities.

"Well?"

He waited until it was clear she would not speak.

"I'll bet you're a virgin, too."

Her eyes widened, just enough. He chuckled.

"Thought so."

Phantom pressed her back again. Her legs bumped the edge of the bed and he pushed her on her back, carefully falling on top of her, his arms holding himself off her. She crossed her arms.

"Please," she said from under him, her voice tight. "I don't want—"

"You don't know what you want. Not yet." He pulled her arms away from her breasts, pressed them to her sides, caught her gaze. "You don't know because you've never had it. Just a fat, shy girl, all your short life. Now you've got this perfect body with a perfect man on top of you and you don't know what to do or what to feel."

He'd hit home; her face twisted as she tried not to cry.

"Confused, but not irredeemably so," he said gently. He brought his face close and brushed her lips with his. Her body tensed. "You're a stunning beauty, you know."

On her face desire struggled with fear. For a moment fear took over as she tried to pull away, but she was easy to hold. She had no idea how strong her new body was, still thought of herself as weak. Proof of his greater strength was all she needed to convince her to stop struggling.

He grabbed a large handful of her thick, red hair and twisted her head to the side, exposing her white neck, stroking the skin there with his lips, nibbling at the softest spots. His other hand snaked over the top of her low-cut dress, traveling along her soft breasts and playing with her nipples, making them hard. His hand came out, went down between her legs, fingers slipping under her underwear.

She was breathing hard. When he found what he was searching for she whimpered.

"Please," she whispered.

"Please yes, or please no? Which is it?" He pushed a finger inside her to feel her wetness. "You don't want it, eh? Your body says you're a liar, Carrot."

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She did not fight him now as he took off her clothes, but lay there, tense and unmoving, watching him as he took off his own.

He marveled at bright red hair against flawless white skin, at the thin red tracks his nails left on her flat, hard stomach. Spreading her legs, he tasted her. She made a sound halfway between a moan and a sob.

He pulled himself up on top of her again. When he plunged into her she gave a small cry that mingled with his moan. As he moved, her whimpers softened.

"I've had dozens like you," he whispered into her ear, breathing hard. "You can lie to yourself, but your body can't lie to me." He pushed himself deep in again, and she inhaled. "How does it feel, to be wanted? To be hungered for? Tell me you don't like it and I'll stop."

She blinked up at him, her blue eyes wet, tears like jewels on her copper lashes.

Phantom kissed her again, hard and deep, felt her hesitant response. Then it grabbed him completely, his twenty-year-old body doing easily what his real body, old and infested with cancer, no longer could. He felt himself thrown to the top of a high, fiery peak and hurled over the summit.

He lay on her, catching his breath, swimming in sweetness. After a while he pulled out, brushed her cheek with his fingertips, and stood, marveling at the drive and energy his new body had.

"How about a drink, Carrot?" he asked.

She lay curled up on the bed.

"The angels like us to treat our host bodies real nice, so the bar's only open for two hours. Now's our chance." He pulled on his pants and shirt.

He sat down on the bed next to her, stroking strands of flame-colored hair out of her face.

"This is *life,* little one. The heat of the chase, the passion of flesh—my flesh, your flesh—" She put a hand up to stop his touch.

He grabbed her hand. "All the things you never knew about," he said. "Now's your chance. If you don't run with it now, you'll be back in your prison of flesh before you know it. Do you think it will make that much difference, losing a few pounds?" He shook his head. "The difference is in you."

She shut her eyes and turned away. He grabbed a fistful of her hair, forced her to face him.

Her eyes opened wide, a startling blue, like the sky over Paradise.

"How old are you?" She didn't answer so he shook her head a little.

"Twenty-two," she whispered.

"Well, I'm eighty-seven. So when I talk, you'd do well to listen. Three months in Paradise isn't a lot, but it might be enough for you to find out some things about yourself. To find something to fill yourself with besides food. Stop living in a shell, Carrot. Go take some chances. Have some fun."

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She looked like she might cry again.

"I know," he said gently. "You hate me for telling you the truth. Hate me, then. But think about my words. Paradise is your chance. And right now there isn't long left for that drink."

After a minute of silence he got up and left. As he closed the door behind him he heard her begin to sob.

Torches lit the Paradise bar as the tropical sunlight faded. The blinds had been rolled up to let in the warm night air. The only permanent resident of Paradise, a large green parrot by the door, greeted Phantom with his usual "come right in and have a drink."

"You're looking younger every year, Percy," Phantom said to the bird. The bird cocked his head and responded, "Happy, happy, Paradise."

Phantom chuckled and looked around. The bar was crowded, as always. Owl sat in a far corner with a half dozen other people, most of them women.

Phantom's arrangement with Owl had been made back in the real world, when Owl was considering coming to Paradise to rehab his hip. Aside from the man's business background and willingness to spend a lot of money on new youth, Phantom knew little about him. That was all right; Owl knew nothing at all about Phantom. Owl's reputation in the business world said he knew how to keep his mouth shut. Phantom hoped he would remember.

Phantom's eyes fell on the other new woman, the dark-haired one. She sat alone, and Phantom's eyes widened in surprise at his good luck. He walked over to her table.

"Welcome to Paradise," he said. "You should have company on your first night here. May I join you?"

"Sure," she said. "Have a seat." He did.

She was dressed in silk again, a simple black dress that she wore with the slightly awkward posture of the newly arrived. She was beautiful, like everyone in Paradise, but to Phantom's eyes she stood out. Her expression was one of openness, as if she had yet to make up her mind about the things around her. She took a sip of her drink and looked long at him.

"What?" he asked, feigning a touch of self-conscious uncertainty. He looked down at himself as if to check his clothes.

She shook her head. "I was just wondering how you could tell I was new."

"I saw you and Carrot Top together as you walked out of the offices this morning. The uncertain look, the suitcase—a dead giveaway."

"Ah."

She poked at the ice in her drink with a long, perfectly shaped nail.

"What should I call you?" he asked.

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"My name is Celeste."

"I'm Phantom," he said. He raised a finger to signal a waiter.

"I'll have—whatever she's having," he told the waiter.

"Scotch," she said.

"Scotch," he repeated. "Glenlivet," he added.

"The good stuff," she said.

"The best."

The waiter returned a few moments later with Phantom's drink.

He took a sip. "I used to make my living overseeing production of this stuff," he said.

"You don't say."

"Oh, but it's true. People will say all sorts of things here in Paradise. They feel renewed, they think they can be anyone, and no one can check. But I have no need to impress you with little things like that."

She gave him an amused smile.

"Don't believe me?" He sat back. "Did you know that a good single malt whiskey has to age at least ten years?"

She shook her head.

"As it ages, about a percent and a half of it evaporates every year. The Scots call this 'the angels' share.'"

Celeste laughed once. Softly, charmingly. Now she believed him. Or she didn't care.

"Here in Paradise," Phantom went on, smiling, "the angels always get their share. So we have to take what we can in the short time we have."

"I suppose you had something specific in mind."

"You might say that."

He put his hand on top of hers, stroked her fingers lightly.

She looked at his hand, her smile vanishing.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Touching you," he said, keeping his eyes on her. "Wanting to touch you more."

"Yes, I know," she said. "I look great. The image in the mirror stuns me, too. But we've just met and you're moving way too fast." She pulled her hand back away from his.

"We have to move fast here. Time is something we don't have a lot of." He walked his fingers toward her on the table like a spider. "I've been here over a month already."

"I see. Only two months left to play." She brought her palm down slowly on his fingers, flattening his hand against the table under hers. "So you run around Paradise, screwing gorgeous women. Must be a hard life."

"I'm not complaining," Phantom said. "Nothing like a twenty-something year old body to help clarify your priorities."

She looked at him knowingly. "But you're not twenty-something, are you. Much older, I'd guess."

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He nodded.

"An old man in a young man's body," she said, "What a killer combination. All the confidence and experience of age mixed with physical youth and virility. You must clean up."

Phantom could not keep himself from grinning. "You should find out."

She laughed once and moved her hand over his caressingly.

"Is it hard to leave here?"

His smile dimmed. "You forget the pain when you're here. You forget a lot of things. Then you go back. It's like going to prison."

Her focus was distant. "It's odd, thinking of how my host's mind is in my real body now, trying to rehab my legs after the accident."

He gave her an interested, questioning look. "I won't pry."

She shrugged.

"A semi had my car for lunch and my legs for dessert." Her lips twitched, trying for a smile. "So now I pay a stranger to take my pain and do my work. Still, it feels strange, having someone else suffer for me."

"Nothing to feel bad about. Your host is getting paid," Phantom said. "Plenty."

"And in three months she'll be back in this fabulous body and I'll never walk again."

"So enjoy those legs while you've got them."

"If we could stay here longer . . ."

"Wouldn't that be nice."

Her voice got quiet. "You know, I heard someone at the bar say there's a chemical that can counter the rejection process. Let you stay longer than three months."

Phantom laughed. "That rumor and Percy the parrot are the only two things that never leave Paradise."

Celeste looked disappointed. "You're sure?"

"Even if there was a way to prevent a body from rejecting a transferred consciousness—" he shrugged. "You'd still have a handful of problems. A hell of a time finding a host, for one. Three months, for big bucks, yes. But a lifetime? You couldn't pay anyone enough."

"I suppose that's true."

"You know, there's another rumor going around. About an angel under cover."

"Really? What for?"

He shrugged. "Maybe the angels think someone really has an anti-rejection drug and they're checking around. 'Celeste'— 'of heaven.' Am I right?"

"It was my aunt's name."

He watched her for a long moment. Her brows drew together, then her nostrils flared once.

"Maybe I'm an angel under cover, is that what you're saying?"

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"No, I'm just being paranoid. They keep us under very tight tabs here. I get kind of tired of it, is all. I'm sorry."

"Celeste really *is* my name. You could check the files. I'd be happy to authorize it."

He smiled at her, a mix of admiration and amused skepticism.

"I'm serious," she said.

"I know you are. But records can be doctored."

"Gods above, Phantom. If I were an angel, would I choose such an obvious name? Some people here use their real names, you know. Like me."

Phantom had learned, many years ago and in the hardest possible way, that there was no sure way to spot a liar. He had also learned that never to trust is never to win.

"I believe you," he said. "No undercover angels, and no anti-rejection drug."

She sighed. "So that's how it is. Three months in Paradise and then back to hell."

He shrugged. "Three months or a hundred years." He moved his chair closer to hers. "You still have to make the moments count."

Celeste regarded him a moment, then nodded.

"Come to my room, Celeste."

"You're very good at this."

"Wait until you see what I'm really good at."

He could tell that she hadn't planned to smile at that, but couldn't help it. She was charmed. He took her hand and stood, drawing her up. She put her arm through his, and together they walked out.

"So," Owl asked Phantom over breakfast, "how was it?"

"How was what?" Phantom asked. He was distracted, looking around the dining room for Celeste.

Owl nodded at another table.

"There. Chowing down. Your Carrot Top."

Phantom looked at the redhead, grinned. "Tasty. The host body isn't, of course, but—" he tapped his head, "up here she's all cherry. Or was."

"You stud," Owl said, half mockingly, half admiringly.

Phantom looked around the room again for a dark head of hair.

"She's packing it away," Owl said, still staring at the redhead. "You were right."

"Of course. You don't change a person by changing their body. Her host will take off some fat and then spend another three months taking off what Carrot Top put on *her* body while she was away. When Carrot gets back, she'll eat herself back to where she was in no time flat, having wasted the entire three months here."

Owl chuckled. "You don't have much faith in human nature, do you."

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"Plenty of faith. I've seen it before. I didn't make myself rich by underestimating human stupidity."

"One of these days I'd like to know just what kind of business you're in."

Phantom chuckled. "Retired."

"Sure," Owl said skeptically, then looked back at the red-haired woman. "Twenty pounds in three months, you say. I'd bet on the redhead. I think she'll find other things to do in Paradise besides eating. I think she'll change."

"I'd take that bet for real money and you'd lose," Phantom said. "It's a shame we won't be around to find out."

Owl's dark eyes were suddenly on him. "When do we leave?"

Phantom lowered his voice. "Tonight, eleven P.M., at the east end of Paradise, where there's a dock gate. No extra clothes, don't look like you're packing to leave. And don't be late."

"The drug—are you sure—"

Phantom cut him off with a sharp hand gesture. "You either trust me or you don't."

He and Owl locked gazes a moment, then Owl nodded.

A dark-haired woman walked into the room, sat down at a table.

"Aha. Excuse me," Phantom said, standing.

At another table, another man stood, tall, muscular, and blond. He reached out and grabbed the collar of the shorter, dark-haired man with him, and yanked him to his feet. The smaller man put one hand on the arm holding his collar, the other on the elbow, and quickly dropped. There was a dull crack and the taller man howled. Other men surrounded the two, and in moments it turned into a brawl, complete with curses and the sound of fists hitting flesh.

Phantom walked around the edge of the room, making his way toward Celeste. Everyone was standing now, most backing away from the fight or going toward it. It wouldn't take long for the bouncer-sized white clad angels to come and break it up.

Phantom passed behind the redhead. He stepped up to her, put his mouth by her ear.

"Morning, Carrot dear," he whispered. She jumped, turned, backed a step away from him, bumping into someone else who glared then looked back at the fight. "Don't worry," Phantom said, nodding at the brawl. "Men tend to be a little violent at this age, and most of them don't know how to deal with being strong, good-looking, and young all at once. Now, us older men, even in young bodies, we know how to control our temper."

"But not your—" she said, then flushed.

"But not our dicks?" He grinned. "Want to do it again tonight? Test my control some more?"

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Her eyes widened and she shook her head. "I should report you."

He laughed. "But you won't. You keep saying 'no,' Carrot Top, and someone's going to believe you. It isn't really what you want. Is it?"

He stared at her until she looked away, then he stepped past her, chuckling, trailing his fingers across her breast. She sniffed and pulled away, but it took her a moment too long.

He found Celeste, standing by the door, watching the scuffle. He admired her for a moment before stepping close and taking her hand.

"You look great," he said softly.

"So do you."

"I'd better. I paid plenty for this flesh."

"Are you free tonight?" she asked.

He shook his head wistfully, almost regretting his appointment with his own future.

"Ah," she said, disappointed but still smiling. "Another date?"

"Not that sort. I think you've ruined me for sex with anyone else. Last night was definitely a high water mark."

"Bet you say that to all the girls."

"Yes, but this time I mean it."

She laughed, shrugged. "Easy come, easy go."

"No, not with you. I mean—" He stepped up close to her, caressed her cheek. What was there about her? "Damn."

"Excuse me?"

"Damn my appointment. Will you give me your real name, so I can look you up when we get back to our real bodies?"

"Will you give me yours?"

He snorted and shook his head. They grinned at each other.

"Then how about tomorrow night?" she asked.

"I'd like to," he said. Except that he wouldn't be here tomorrow and he couldn't tell her that. "Look for me. We'll set something up."

The thought of her wandering around Paradise looking for him after he was gone was a bittersweet image that tugged at him.

"All right," she said with a warm smile. He echoed her smile, the pretense harder than it should have been.

Phantom knew Joe from the real world, from years ago, had employed him before as a bodyguard. Now Joe was on the other side of the dock's locked gate, in the darkness, his penlight illuminating the card-lock that separated Phantom and Owl from Joe and his boat. Phantom didn't know the details of how Joe had managed to get the card key and combination, but it didn't matter who had been bribed or pressured to reveal the information. It only mattered that Joe had it, and could open the gate that would take Owl and Phantom to freedom and new lives.

A bright, focused beam brushed nearby tree tops, then vanished.

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"We have company," Owl said softly. Joe, about to open the lock, reached instead for his gun. The light passed again, closer, toward the top of the tall gate.

"Damn," Phantom whispered. "Joe, we've got to cancel." At Owl he hissed, "Run. I'll catch up with you later." Owl took off at a quiet jog through the brush.

"Skip to next rendezvous," Phantom told Joe, referring to a prearranged time that only they two knew.

"You've got a rat," Joe whispered back.

"Could be an accidental pass-by, no?"

"No. I know Paradise. There shouldn't be anyone here now. If it's a client on the other end of that beam, then it's a fluke, but if it's an angel, you've got a rat on your ship and I don't want it on mine."

Phantom exhaled his frustration. There was a bitter taste in his mouth and the light was coming back. "All right," he told Joe. "Meet next time."

Phantom took off in the direction that Owl had gone. He followed the light back through the trees until he saw a flash of angel white.

There was only one person it could be. He was on his way to Owl's room when he changed his mind and his direction. Owl could wait. He knocked on Celeste's door.

The door opened and she stood there blinking, as if she had just been woken. He stepped inside, shut the door behind him.

"My date canceled," he said. It felt good to see her again. Very good. Somewhere inside he was almost glad for the failed escape. That was not a good reaction; he had to be careful.

"I was asleep."

"Sorry. Want some company?"

"Oh, Phantom, I'm tired, not really up for—" she grinned. "A repeat of last night. Not just yet."

He stared at her a moment, taken with her beauty. He sat down on the bed next to her.

"How about if I just stay here with you? Just sleep here next to you?"

"Careful, you'll make me feel special."

He nodded soberly. "Good. So, may I stay?"

She looked at him curiously. "I know your type, Phantom; you manipulate, you get people to dance to your music. What are you doing here with me?"

It was a good question. He wasn't sure.

"Let's just say that I like you. I'd like to get to know you better."

She grinned. "Yeah, me too. Guess it doesn't make any more sense to you than it does to me. But we've more than a month to figure it out. And honestly, right now I'm really tired."

He shook his head. "I don't have a month. I'm going back early."

"Early?" She frowned. "But I thought you said—"

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"I know. Something's come up with my treatment. They can't risk the host body, so I have to go back."

"Oh my God," she said, sitting down on the bed. "When I get back, I'll come see you. Tell me your real name, Phantom. I'll give you my last name, too."

"I can't."

"Why not? I thought you wanted to see me again."

"I do. Very much. More than I can explain. But—Celeste, I'm terminal. My original body can't even support much in the way of clear thought any more. Even if I survive the three months of your treatment—I don't want you to see me like that. Better for you to remember me like this."

She shook her head. "That's stupid."

"Yes, but I'm a proud man. A proud *old* man, and don't you forget it. You're—what?—in your early forties?"

"Yes. You're good."

"Thanks. I'm pushing ninety, Celeste. A sick, frail, dying old man. You don't need that."

"Don't tell me what I need."

"All right, then I'll tell you what I need. I need to know that you last saw me like this. Healthy. Alive. In love with you."

"Don't give me that crap," she said, but she was smiling.

"All right," he said seriously. "No crap. I'm in love with you."

She lost her smile. "When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow night. That gives us—" He inhaled sharply. "Tonight, and all of tomorrow."

"Talk about whirlwind love affairs. . . ."

He stroked her cheek. "Still tired?"

She shook her head. Tears welled up in her eyes, fell over the brim, trailed down her face. She moved her head against his fingertips.

"Damn it, Phantom. This isn't the way it's supposed to happen."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"So," she said softly, her voice rough, "let's make some moments count, shall we?"

"Let's."

He stayed with her that night and the next day, not leaving the room. When they got hungry, they sent out for food. They talked about everything, his business, her family—everything except death and Paradise.

He kept telling himself to be careful, but at the last moment he could not seem to stop himself; he told her about the boat, the trip, and the drug.

He sat on the edge of the bed, took her hand.

"Come with me, Celeste."

She frowned. "But what about the host body?"

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"The host stays in my old body."

"Your old body is dying, you said."

He gave her a quick smile. "I exaggerated a bit. I've got cancer, but they still consider it treatable or I wouldn't be here. Thing is, I know better. I can feel it in my bones, that my body is dying, and dying fast." He shrugged. "I'm ninety, what do you expect?"

"Then—the host will die, too?"

"He's got the same chance I had."

"And that's not much."

"It's me or him. Sometimes you have to give something to get something else."

"And it's easier to give up someone else's body."

"Easier than my own, that's for sure."

She pulled her hand out of his, looked away. "The angels' share."

"Excuse me?"

"What you lose, year after year of life, that makes you so—concentrated."

"And that is?"

"Your morals."

He exhaled. "Celeste, I don't have time for this. Come with me. I know it's not as much of a benefit for you, you being only forty, but it's twenty years more of life for you, too, and you'd keep this body, complete with working legs."

"Tempting. But—I couldn't live with myself if I did that. To trap someone else in my broken body. . . ?"

He glanced at his watch. "Two minutes until I walk out that door. I have to go or I'll die. Come with me, Celeste."

"No, stay with me. You *can* get better, if you really want to. And I don't care if you're ninety or a hundred, I love you and—"

He snorted. "I won't live out the year in my own body, no matter what I do. Not even that long, Celeste. And never mind sex. What would there be to love?"

"Phantom, this isn't right. You shouldn't do this."

"Celeste, I can't stay."

"Then go," she said very softly.

He swallowed, ignoring the pain in his head, and bent to kiss her mouth, but she turned away, tears in her eyes. He kissed her forehead instead and stared at her face for a long moment trying to fix it in his mind. What did she really look like? When he shut the door behind him his stomach felt hollow, as if something had been torn out.

Joe slipped a plastic card into the security box at the east gate and punched in the access code. It was a dark night, with pale starlight and a bit of moon brushing silver on Paradise's tropical trees. Phantom turned

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his back on Joe to watch the woods for lights, but he was thinking about Celeste.

He found himself turning over plans in his head, about sending someone back to get her even though he knew she wouldn't come. Perhaps once he was away from Paradise, once he had freed himself of the yoke of disease and imminent death, he would find she held less hold on his heart. He almost hoped so.

Owl was, he decided, the only one who could have given them away last time, so this time Phantom had neglected to invite him.

Phantom's eyes flickered everywhere. This was his chance to live again. If ever there was a time to be careful, it was now.

"We're clear," Joe whispered behind him as the gate clicked open. Joe stepped back, opening the gate. Phantom turned to follow.

He felt as much as saw the movement behind him. He whirled as a shadow broke away from the night's corners and became a figure with a gun.

"Phantom, don't," she said.

He glanced at the gun, snorted. " 'Of heaven,' " he said. "Well played, my angel."

"I won't say a thing, I swear it. Just leave the gate, and come back."

"And die? I don't think so." He stepped toward the open gate. Joe was backing silently to the boat.

"Don't, Phantom," she said, her voice a mix of command and plea.

"You won't shoot me, Celeste. This is a host body. Be a terrible shame to put holes in it."

"No holes," she said, "tranqs. Phantom, don't make me do this. If you go any further, I'll tranq you and take you in."

"Nice to have choices," he said, stopping. He brought his hands up on either side of his face, his palms facing her. He wiggled his fingers.

"See?" he asked.

"See what?"

The quiet pop came from Joe's direction, and Celeste gave a muffled yelp and dropped to her knee, clutching her upper arm, the gun dangling from her fingers.

One part of Phantom's mind marveled at how well simple distractions worked. It was one of the oldest tricks in the book. The other part of him chilled at the sight of Celeste crumpling, her arm dripping blood.

He closed, kicked her onto her back and dropped a knee on the forearm of her injured side. She struggled with him, cursing softly as he twisted the gun out of her trembling grip.

"Move it," Joe hissed. "The gate's going to sound an alarm if it's open another thirty seconds."

Phantom aimed Celeste's gun at her.

"Hope you were telling the truth, sweetheart," he whispered as he shot her in the leg.

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"Now!" Joe hissed.

Phantom reached down, hefted the limp woman, and threw her over his shoulder.

"What the hell . . . ?" Joe asked angrily.

"Let's go," Phantom told him. He stepped through the gate, and Joe slammed it shut behind.

Swearing softly, Joe jumped onto the boat and fired up the engine. Phantom boarded and went below deck, grabbing on tight as the boat lurched away from the dock.

Then he took Celeste down below, laid her on a bunk, and went for the first aid kit.

Phantom went below to check on Celeste. They were days out of Paradise now, passing a cluster of small islands. Her shoulder was healing nicely. She must have heard Joe and turned a split second before he shot, because Joe never aimed to wound and he usually didn't miss.

Injured and drugged she might be, but Phantom had used plenty of duct tape to keep her tied, with less emphasis on her comfort than on his. The pain killers had kept her under, so there were bedpans and water bottles littered around the bunk. Joe would have nothing to do with her, so Phantom silently handled it all. She'd seemed unconscious or asleep most of the time, though Phantom was sure he had seen her eyes open to slits once or twice while he wandered around below deck.

She was an angel, all right. Paradise could afford it, so there was every reason to believe she was the best, hired to come in as a client and search for the semi-mythical transfer drug. He stared at her face for a long moment, thought about hitting her, thought about kissing her.

He checked the bandages on her shoulder and felt her head for fever. She moved under his touch, just as she had when they made love together.

"Celeste," he said, stroking her cheek with the back of his fingers.

She opened her eyes, moaned.

"You know, I really should be very angry with you."

"I'm still alive," she said, with wonder. She moved a little, struggling against the duct tape, and winced at the pain in her shoulder.

"You sucker punched me," Phantom said.

"Then why is it *my* shoulder that hurts like hell?"

"Bad aim on Joe's part. You should be dead."

She sighed, a long exhale.

"I thought," he said with a wry grin, "I'd been had for the last time, many years ago."

"Once you're sure of that, you're the best kind of target."

He chuckled. "Ah, Celeste. . . . Not your real name, I assume."

"No."

"And the body?"

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She hesitated. "Born with it."

"Damn," he said admiringly. "You can't be over twenty-five, girl. You're good."

"Not good enough. Phantom—"

"You know my real name," he said, suddenly run dry of polite conversation. "Why not use it?"

She looked genuinely startled. "Because I know you as Phantom. That's who you are to me. And yes, I caught you off guard. Yes, I suckered you. But you know— it wasn't in my contract to seduce you."

"I thought I seduced *you*."

"You did."

He laughed in spite of himself. "You're quite good."

"Thank you," she said, then exhaled. "Gods above, Phantom, when you asked me to come with you, I almost said yes."

"Don't give me that."

"It's true. I could have given up pursuing you, told them you didn't have the drugs, and then taken on a new identity, just to be with you. I seriously considered it. But I couldn't—it just isn't right."

"You mean trying to stay alive?"

"At the cost of someone else's life."

"A moralizing angel. Charming. I didn't create the cancer, Celeste. I didn't choose to grow old and sick. I use what I have to get what I need, that's all."

"And the man whose body you inhabit now? What about him?"

"What about him? He made his choices. He chose to be a host. You play the game, you take your chances."

She shook her head. "No. I can't condone that—"

"I'm not asking you to. I've been fighting the angels all my life. They always wanted a share of the good stuff I had. Every year of my life they took a bit more. Sagging mid-line, hurting knees, bad stomach. But the greedy little bastards weren't happy with that, they had to make my cells insane, too." He smiled humorlessly. "Now I'm taking it all back."

"You don't see it, do you."

"Oh, I think I see it pretty clearly."

"It's not your body you lost, year by year."

"My morals, you already told me."

"Yes. You gave away a bit of your heart every year. You let them take the stuff that makes you the kind of person who can care about another person. Who can love."

"Love." He tried to feel nothing, failed. "With you, I loved, Celeste."

She nodded. "Yes. So they haven't gotten it all, not quite. Phantom," she said earnestly, "come back with me. I'll testify on your behalf. Give this man's body back. Show me what you can be, show me that you can care that much."

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"Not a chance in hell. I'd die. You have no idea what it's like to live with this shit—the chemo, the operations, the pain, the loss of my *mind*—you, with your young body, your health—you've got a lot of goddamned nerve telling me what's moral."

She stared back at him, her expression suddenly hard. His hand on her arm was shaking. She had pissed him off, and fast. Almost as fast as she had intrigued him. Almost as fast as she had made him love her.

"What you're doing is wrong. Damn it, Phantom, look inside yourself and—"

"That's it. I'm done with this conversation."

"I'm not. Listen—"

"Shut up, Celeste."

"And if I don't? I can't just sit here quiet and let you do this."

"If you can't offer me anything but the advice that I kill myself then I'll throw you overboard."

There wasn't a touch of fear in her expression. Good training and youth made her fearless of death. Somehow it made her even more beautiful to him, and that fueled his anger.

The angels had taken enough already. Now they wanted to take his heart as well. He wouldn't give it to them.

"Then do it," she hissed. "I'll drown. And with me throw out the last bit of what makes you human. Live a life of shallow pleasure in another man's body, while he dies an agonizing death in yours."

"Exactly what I had in mind."

"Then you'd better toss me over, because I'm not going to stop telling you what I think of you."

He squeezed her arm tightly. She didn't seem to notice.

"Don't challenge me, Celeste."

"Too much for you? Show me what you're made of, Phantom. I'm tied up. What a challenge for you to toss me in the drink," she said sarcastically. "Another death on your hands, but so what? You've already done so much to preserve your own life. What's a little more?"

He gripped her arm harder.

"Don't."

"Or turn this boat back to Paradise. I'm not going to let you off, Phantom. I care too much about you to shut up."

"You can't keep your mouth shut, and I don't care to listen. One of us is going to lose."

Her voice became suddenly impassioned, pleading. "Phantom, come back with me. Give yourself up. Do what's right."

He grabbed her arms, hauled her out of the bed, and she howled and struggled, tearing open the bandage on her arm. Holding her under his arms like a sack of potatoes, something he would never be able to do in his original body, he walked up the steps to the deck, not bothering to try

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to prevent her head and knees from knocking against the walls of the small passageway.

Once on deck he stood her on her feet, held her tight against him, her back to his front, so she could see the ocean. She struggled, but silently, then suddenly twisted, trying to knee him in the balls with the side of her body. He held an arm tight around her neck until they were locked together tight. They were both breathing hard.

From across the deck Joe watched.

"Beg me," he said to her.

Her voice was nothing but defiance. "What you're doing is wrong, Phantom."

Phantom picked her up, hefted her above his head in one motion.

"Beg me or you're going in," he said over the warm wind.

"Rot in hell, you bastard," she shouted back.

"You were right, Celeste: I have no morals. Very right."

He hurled her into the ocean. She slammed into the water, jackknifing like a fish to stay afloat. He watched her thrash expertly as the boat went by, estimated that she could survive a half hour if she kept it up.

Then she'd drown.

He turned away, shaking.

"Hey!" Joe came over, looking out at the swirling water around Celeste. "What's this about?"

"Just getting rid of the garbage."

"Shit. First you insist on taking her, and now you dump her? Fine, but let's do it right this time." He pulled out a gun, aimed it at the woman in the water. Phantom pushed his hand aside.

"No. She wanted to drown. I'm giving her her wish."

Joe lowered the gun, snorted, and shrugged. "You're the boss." They watched as the struggling woman got farther away.

Joe shook his head, grinned. "I thought you were sweet on her, the way you took care of her."

Phantom turned away, went below deck. He stood there a moment, then slammed his fist into the cabinet that housed the flotation vests. It made his fist hurt like hell, but it was a clean pain, not like what he felt inside. He did it again. Still, his throbbing fist didn't drown out what he was feeling in his stomach.

At least it wasn't the physical pain of impending death, which was what he'd left back at the Paradise hospital.

Another paradise awaited him now, he reminded himself. In another country, with palm trees and quiet beaches, where his money waited patiently for him. They would treat him right there, and for as long as he wanted. He had worked hard to buy himself another lifetime. He would get back what the angels had taken from him.

When they came, the tears surprised him.

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"Shit, Celeste," he said to the air. He stood, stamped over to the radio, and phoned in to one of the islands.

"Man overboard," he told them, giving them the location where he had thrown her in. "So get your asses out here and rescue her."

"Identify yourself."

"Fuck you," he said, disconnecting.

He yelled up a new course at Joe, one that would take them into the islands, where there were enough boats that they would be lost in the crowd, and no one would link them with the injured woman in the ocean. By the time the rescue boat found Celeste and got her to talk, Phantom's boat would be through the islands and en route to their final destination.

And Celeste—if she managed to stay afloat for a half hour, and he was sure she could even in her injured state, they'd find her and she'd live.

He went above deck and looked out at the ocean, back toward where he'd left her. All he could see was blue ocean.

It should have pissed him off, to realize that she still had a piece of his heart, a piece he could not go back and claim without losing his life.

It didn't. He would live with what he had, and live without what he did not have. He would live without Celeste. He would *live.*

What really pissed him off was how the angels he had thought he had defeated were taking their share again. ●

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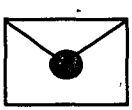

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NEXT ISSUE

JANUARY COVER STORY

One of the modern masters of high-tech space adventure, **G. David Nordley,** helps us start the new year off with a bang, taking us to the Moon next issue for a suspensful tale of conspiracy and high-stakes politics, in our January cover story, "Messengers of Chaos." Murder is rare in the peaceful, tightly managed Lunar society of the future, but murder there has been, murder most foul, and it's up to one man to solve it—and his efforts to solve this bizarre murder mystery take him ever-deeper into an intricate web of ambition, betrayal, passion, fanaticism, and love, and eventually lead him to a discovery that could have a profound effect on the future of humanity in space. This big, complex novella is one of Nordley's best; don't miss it! The evocative cover is by Hugo-winning artist Bob Eggleton.

BIG-NAME WRITERS

Nebula- and Hugo-Award-winner **Nancy Kress** returns to escort us to a high-tech future for an icy and elegant game of truth or consequences, in "Always True to Thee, in My Fashion"; Nebula- and Hugo-winner **Geoffrey A. Landis** undertakes a sly and twisty journey in search of "Ouroboros"; hot new British "hard science" writer **Stephen Baxter** shows us some unexpected consequences of the Space Race of the mid-1960s, in the mind-blowing "Zemlya"; veteran author **Tom Purdom** sends a hapless immigrant to a crowded, dog-eat-dog Moon for a life-and-death chase through the lower depths—literally and figuratively—of Lunar society in the thrilling "Canary Land"; **Robert R. Chase** makes an impressive *Asimov's* debut by painting a subtle and evocative portrait of "The Figure of Drosselmeyer"; and **Daniel Marcus** returns to give us an inside glimpse into the pressure-cooker world of Show Business, and to explain how, if you're not very careful, you can get "Killed in the Ratings."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column takes us Upstairs for a perspective "Six Trillion Miles High"; plus **Paul Di Filippo** with "On Books," and an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features.

Look for our exciting January issue on sale on your newsstand on November 19, 1996, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the great stories that we have coming up for you in 1997! Find out for yourself why we've won the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine for an unprecedented six years in a row, or why we put more stories on the 1996 Final Hugo Ballot than all of our competitors combined. Subscribe today!

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S. N. Dyer

GIFTS

Don't cross a woman who's been touched by the gods . . .

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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John McLaren, it is said, hated statues. Every time the city fathers inflicted his new park with a statue, he planted something quick growing and tenacious that would eventually hide it.

Thus it was not unusual for Andrea to jog round a corner in Golden Gate Park and come across an unexpected statue. This one was a beefy classical gentleman, wearing nothing but a fig-leaf and a power expression, hands poised to hold something that had long since disappeared. He had definitely been there a hundred years or more, but inexorable climate change had wreaked havoc upon the ornamental shrubs ordinarily surrounding him. So Andrea was not that surprised to see him.

She was, however, annoyed to see a band of scruffy teens drinking wine and spray painting the statue.

"Stop that!" she shouted. During her own teen cruising days, drawing peace signs everywhere, the mere sight of an adult had been enough to send her friends packing. Kids nowadays, however—if one were to believe *The Chronicle*—were prone to random acts of murder one.

But the kids had buzz cuts and loose shorts and caps worn backward. They just didn't look threatening to Andrea. They looked like high school morons pretending to be the Bowery Boys.

"Why should we?" one of the kids asked. He sneered menacingly. He had no clue that he looked like Huntz Hall. Or Leo Gorcey. Andrea never had known which was which.

"Because defacing public property is uncool."

"Oh. *Cool. Coo-ol.* Want us to show you cool?"

At that point Andrea's dog arrived on the scene. Fang, half rottweiler and half German shepherd, with a perpetual scowl due to facial paralysis from a middle ear infection and a stubby tail that wagged invisibly. She trotted over to see if all these nice teenagers might have a treat for her.

They dropped their various toys, and took off running.

"Good girl, Fang," said Andrea. She looked up at the statue. He had various obscenities painted on his legs—funny, she didn't know you could misspell a four letter word—but was otherwise all right.

"Tough day, dude," she remarked. She picked up the gallon jug of Red Mountain—at least drinking habits hadn't changed much since her youth—and emptied it onto the gravel in front of the statue. "Hope it gets better." Then she jogged off, arms laden with paint and wine bottle, to find a trash can.

She didn't hear the screech of wheels or the screams a few blocks away, where four punk kids decided to cross Nineteenth Avenue without the light. She did hear the sirens later, but didn't think about them.

Looking back on it, that day in the park was when everything weird started. Well, not really *everything*. Living in San Francisco is just plain

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weird anyway. But that was ordinary weirdness—transvestites renting your downstairs apartment, people next to you on the streetcar reading *The Joy of Sadomasochism*—not *real* weirdness.

Andrea was heading out the door laden with vegetables. She had a small garden out back, typical of houses in the Sunset District; usually there was so much fog that not even the artichokes produced. But this last couple months the garden had gone wild, to the point that she had enough zucchini and tomatoes to feed half the city.

The transvestites Terry and Gerry were stumbling in after a late night. They did some kind of exotic dancing, never getting home before dawn or rising before dark. It was sort of like renting to vampires—again, rather ordinary San Francisco weirdness.

"Hey, remember to pick some veggies," she said.

Gerry flounced a bit. "I'm sorry dear, if I hear the word tomato anymore outside the theatre, I'll vomit." You'd never suspect he had his Ph.D. in Geophysics, but didn't want to work for the ecovillain oil companies. Terry, it was sad to say, only had his Masters in Classical Literature. But again, this was San Francisco, where the cabbies usually had philosophy degrees from Berkeley.

Mr. Brickmore yelled from his doorstep across the street.

"Hey! You!"

She waited while he stalked over, a cardboard box in his arms.

"Hi. Want some zucchini?"

"No," he snarled. "I told you to keep your pets out of my yard."

"Fang never goes near it."

"I mean your cat."

"Zippy? Have you seen the Zipster?" Her calico tabby had disappeared a week ago; she and Fang had been disconsolate.

"She's had kittens in my barbecue."

"Couldn't be Zippy. She's fixed."

"Oh *yeah?*"

He thrust the box into her hands. Little mewing noises emanated from it.

Andrea peered into the box. It was indeed Zippy, curled protectively around half a dozen tiny kittens.

"But I had her fixed . . ."

Fang came running out the still open door, jumping up happily to sniff at the box. Come to think of it, the dog was getting pretty fat too . . . Andrea had thought it was because she'd been so busy they hadn't run much lately, but the dog's nipples were ominously prominent. *I'm going to murder that vet,* she thought.

"You owe me for the charcoal," said Mr. Brickmore. "And the box."

"I'd keep a civil tongue in your head," said Gerry. "It doesn't pay to argue with Andy here. Remember Mr. Scippolini at the Safeway?"

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"Right," continued Terry. "He got nasty when she complained about the moldy raspberries, and he had a heart attack and died right there."

"And Mrs. Pushkin when she dented Andy's car and wouldn't 'fess up? Next day, went straight off the coast highway."

"Don't you deviants try to threaten *me*," said Mr. Brickmore, snarling back at them as he began to recross the street—only to trip on the curb and fall to the asphalt with a sickening thud. Blood began to seep from his ear.

Andrea put down the box of cats and sprinted for the phone to call 911. Fang stuck her face in the box, and Zippy rubbed against her cheek. At least someone was happy that morning.

"You were supposed to have this on my desk at nine A.M.," said Potter. He had a little ponytail hanging off a balding head, making him look like an extra in a Kurosawa flick. He was from the second generation to hit the Haight Ashbury, after the initial peace-and-love flower children had fried their brains with acid. Potter had been there for sex, drugs, and rock and roll. And if he was married to a globe-trotting corporate lawyer and didn't get much sex nowadays, and if his favorite drug was now Tagamet for his ulcer—well, he still liked his rock pure. When Andrea entered the office he had been smashing someone's Sony portable for playing "Do you think I'm sexy." He could do it. He was the boss.

He was that kind of boss, on an absolute power trip. So naturally he hated freelancers like Andrea, whom he had hired to develop new software.

"I'm sorry I'm late, my neighbor across the street fractured his skull right in front of my house. . . ."

She trailed off. It sounded pretty lame, on the order of my-dog-ate-the-homework. Which, come to think of it, had actually happened twice, in 1968 (high school Spanish) and 1973 (wave mechanics). "Uh look, I brought zucchini. Anyone want zucchini? Tomatoes?"

"I'd like some zucchini," said a man's voice, and Andrea looked over. He was middle-height, expensively suited, with a receding hairline, a cynical smile and one of those air-brushed ties by rock stars turned artist.

"No you don't," said Potter. "If she grew them, they'll have bugs."

"I resent that," she said. "I'm the best damn programmer. . . . Well, I'm real good. . . . Well, I'm about as good as someone my age can be, you know, the kids who grow up with PCs think more computeresque, my generation just isn't intuitive. . . ."

Andrea usually started well, but had a tendency for her poor self-image to emerge.

Potter grabbed the guy in the suit and steered him into his office.

The woman with the demolished stereo said, "Did you see the way he was looking at you, Andrea? I think he likes you."

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Everyone snorted, then got embarrassed by their response and said they'd like some vegetables, to make up for it. Andrea was pleasant enough, for a middle-aged computer nerd dressed in L.L. Bean woodsy style. But no way the guy in the suit could be interested in her. Not him. Not *The King of the Pacific Exchange.*

There were no bugs in her program, it ran fine, so Andrea went to a comic store and celebrated by buying an old issue of *The Flash* she'd really wanted. She had to buy it in Fine condition, couldn't afford even Very Good, but it was the story she wanted.

Then she went home to read her comic alone. She was at the age where her friends had all nested somewhere in New Age Ozzie and Harriet bliss, or else joined various cults and communes, or just moved away to a city where heterosexual single guys were rumored to still exist. She'd tried making friends on the computer net comics forum, but first she'd got flamed by some jerks, and then when people realized she was a girl, she'd been flirted with and propositioned and insulted to the point that she'd decided to play elsewhere. It had been humiliating to be run out of Dodge by a bunch of fat pimply geeks who thought the X-Men were more profound than Zola, but that was life.

She went into her bedroom. Fang was on the bed, surrounded by a dozen newborn puppies. Zippy and her kittens were curled up beside them.

"Oh, great," she said. "I don't need this."

She'd been meaning to pull up a bit of ancient cracked concrete in the backyard and put in rhododendrons; busting concrete seemed the perfect way to deal with the day's frustrations. She took her pick and shovel and a radio outside and began making noise. She wasn't worried; nothing ever woke Terry and Gerry. First, though, she had to push aside vines bent to the ground with fat red tomatoes.

"I could have sworn I planted cherry tomatoes. . . ."

The radio began to play "Working on a Chain Gang."

She had got to the point of starting to pry up the busted slabs of concrete when two men came to the garden gate.

"So this is where you call home—arrgh." It was Potter, and her radio had just begun to play something trivial by Rod Stewart.

"Yeah, so?"

"I had to see you again," said the other man. The King of the Exchange.

"Oh yeah, I promised you zucchini. You can see, I got lots."

He paused, puzzled. "This place is a jungle. . . ." It was atypical for Sunset District soil to produce anything. The place had been a sand dune, after all. "But no, it's not zucchini. . . . I—I think I love you."

She stopped, a slab half raised, exposing virgin dirt below. "Huh? Get real."

Potter took her portable radio and threw it into the next yard, where it

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landed with a satisfactory crunch. The neighbors were firm believers in green cement paving.

"I don't understand it either," said the stock magnate. "You're not really my type—I tend to date ornamental bimbos—but I guess it's love at first sight or something. . . ."

She tossed the cement bit away and sank to the ground. "This has been a really strange day. . . . What's this?"

Something yellow glinted in the exposed dirt of her garden. "Is this mica?"

The King of the Exchange—she really did need to find out his name—came over. "No," he said. "That's not fool's gold. That's *real* gold."

It seems that most home contracts in California have a generally overlooked little footnote designating someone else as the holder of any mineral rights. Thus Andrea didn't even benefit from the gold in the backyard. Which was a lot of bother. They tore up the entire yard and were prepared to demolish the house before her expensive lawyer managed to draw the line.

Lucky it was just a small vein of gold, perhaps washed out of the Sierras in some past glaciation. No one knew, but it made all the geologists cry, like Darwinians running into evidence of Noah's flood. And before they established the vein's limits, every front and back garden in the neighborhood had been torn up too, leaving streets formerly cheery with rhododendrons and roses looking like a West Virginia strip mine. And the poor guy who actually got the gold—the great-great-nephew of the housing developer fifty years earlier—was window shopping downtown when a stone gargoyle, probably loosened in the last quake, fell out of the sky and killed him.

On the bright side—what limited bright side there was—Andrea didn't have to worry about giving away vegetables anymore. Her backyard jungle was no more—although tenacious tomato sprouts were already starting to poke through the rubble.

To make things worse, Potter had decided that her program didn't quite meet his needs and she should fix it for free. He tied up her answering machine daily with angry messages, sandwiched between her suitor's mushy ones. She'd stopped listening.

Eventually the King of the Exchange showed up at her door with flowers and a ring. Terry and Gerry were sitting on the stairs watching him try to get his foot in the door. The mining had disrupted cable service, but this was about as good as Comedy Central.

"Look," Andrea said. "You seem like a nice guy, but my life has just gotten too weird lately. See, first my garden and my pets got astonishingly fertile, and then my enemies started to die, and now you're a king of sorts asking me to marry you. . . . What the hell is going on?"

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"You know," said Terry, "if this happened a couple thousand years ago, people would just figure that the gods loved you."

She stopped to think for a minute, then threw open the door and sprinted for her car. "You've hit the nail on the head!" she called back to Terry.

"I *did?*" he asked, and stared at his hands as if he were unclean. No one with a degree in Classical Literature ever expects his erudition to be actually useful.

Someone had cleaned off the statue, but the name on the pedestal was still unreadable, rubbed off by time.

Andrea had stopped at a liquor store and picked up some Sonoma zinfandel to pour at the statue's base.

"It's not that I don't appreciate the thought," she said. "It's just that, well, modern women in San Francisco don't really need power and vengeance and fertility. We want security and love and, well, some vengeance too, of course, just not anything too violent. So maybe we can just call it even, okay?"

Was it her imagination, or a trick of the clouds, or did the statue wink at her?

When she got home she found the King of the Exchange in the living room, Zippy on his lap, Fang on his feet, kittens and puppies wrestling everywhere else. He was reading *The Flash.*

"I didn't know you liked old comics," he said.

"I could say the same about you."

"Like them . . . . I even was in the business for a while, back in college," he continued enthusiastically. "Did you read *Big Thrill Comics* #267, the one where the Forties hero Joe Freedom runs into his old sexy foe Sunset Friday in the Safeway?"

"And first they reminisce and then they flirt and then they demolish the supermarket? That's my favorite story of all time!"

"I wrote it."

She looked at him with astonishment and admiration. Maybe this being loved by the gods bit *did* have an upside.

Potter, meanwhile, awoke the next morning to discover he had been cursed. Everytime he passed a radio, it played "Do you think I'm sexy." ●

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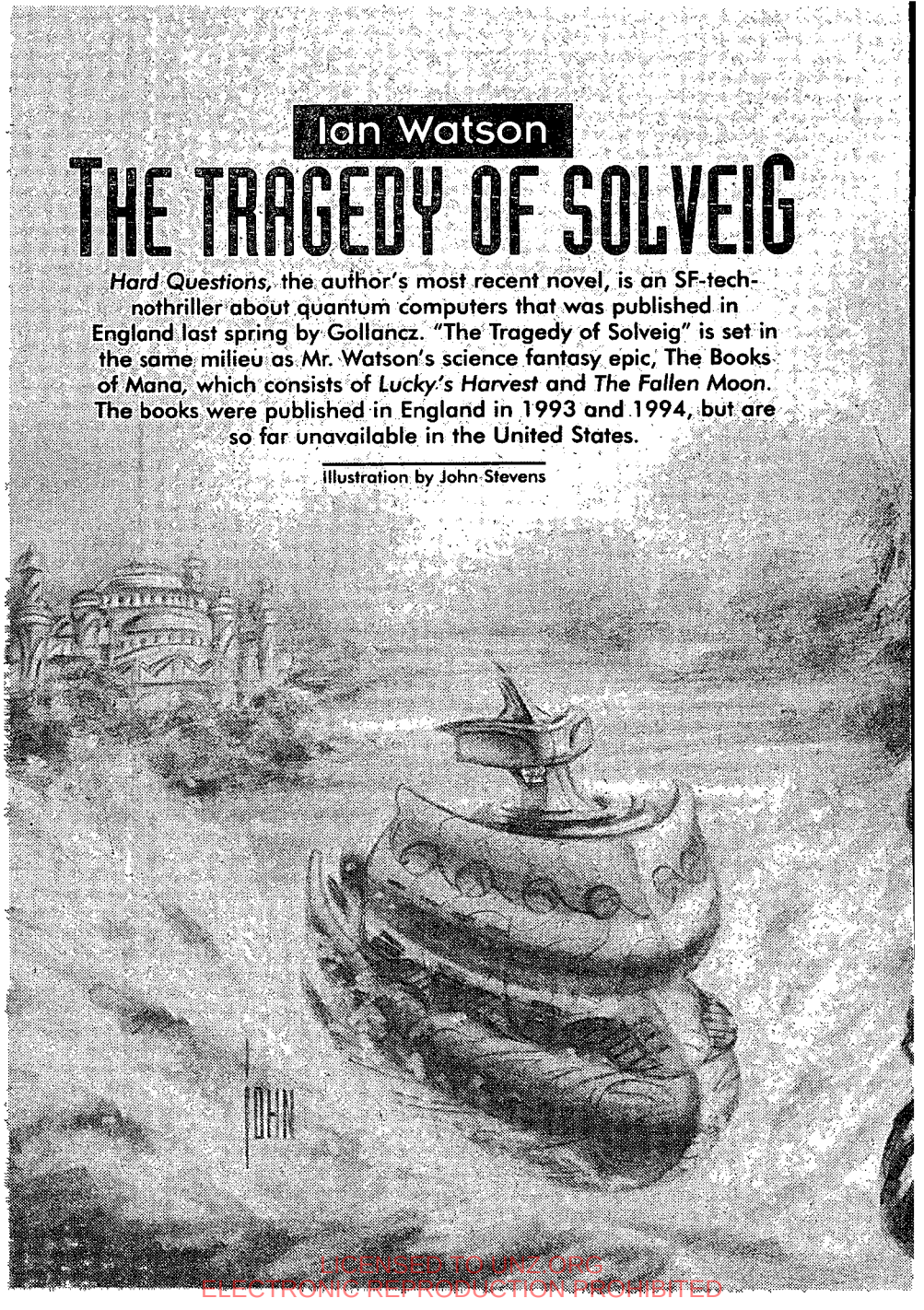
Ian Watson

THE TRAGEDY OF SOLVEIG

Hard Questions, the author's most recent novel, is an SF-technothriller about quantum computers that was published in England last spring by Gollancz. "The Tragedy of Solveig" is set in the same milieu as Mr. Watson's science fantasy epic, The Books of Mana, which consists of *Lucky's Harvest* and *The Fallen Moon*. The books were published in England in 1993 and 1994, but are so far unavailable in the United States.

Illustration by John Stevens



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Somebody had been stalking the traveling players all afternoon. Somebody, or something. Perhaps two somethings.

By evening each of the players had caught a few glimpses of the shadower, or shadowers. Or at least they supposed so.

Trees were already taking on the colors of autumn. Rust and copper and bronze tinged the forest. Those russet glimpses way behind might simply have been foliage stirred by breeze.

Maybe the shadower might indeed be a kind of shadow, in a literal if marvelous sense. Peter Vaara's special talent was the conjuring of visions. He imparted this talent to his troupe. Whenever Peter and Tancred and Stanislav and Natalya and Solveig pulled on their matte black leotards and their coaly skullcaps and performed, they could sway audiences to see pageants.

"Perhaps," said Tan, "we're leaving a sort of trail behind us, just as a boat leaves a phosphorescent wake?"

Tan was pushing the cart loaded with their backdrop screens and tents and possessions. The two big lightweight wheels easily rolled along the dirt road. The troupe could have afforded to buy a shaggy, sturdy pony to harness between the shafts. But then they would have needed to care for the pony. They could almost afford five such ponies. They could have ridden. But Peter's troupe would have begun to resemble a minor circus. Luggage would have multiplied. This would have compromised the purity of their performances. Next thing, they would be needing a servant, a groom, a fetcher and carrier, a tent erector. A servant would have his own needs, and he wouldn't share the affinity that linked the five of them.

Natti glanced back.

"You're denying the obvious, Tan. What's following us is a Juttie. Possibly a pair of them. Keeping in the woods. Keeping pace."

Juttahats. Unmen. . . . Alien servants of the alien serpents.

"Brazen Jutties," said Peter. He sounded almost pleased. Strangeness was delightful.

"Brazen," agreed Natti.

The lustrous coppery livery of a Brazen Juttahat would indeed seem like autumn leaves.

Solli said, "We haven't heard any reports of attacks or abductions lately." There was anxiety in her tone, yet at the same time her mind seemed to be dwelling on something else entirely.

"Very likely they're just curious," was Stan's opinion. "They sense an aura about us."

"Maybe it's our sweat they're sniffing!" said Tan. It had been a warm afternoon. Above the bendy boughs of curver trees (their chartreuse quiffs now turning orange with the season) and above the rusting spade-leafed larkery trees, woolly cumulus clouds sailed slowly through a sky

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that was draining of color, sapphire becoming opal. A haze of sizzleflies accompanied the players, who could all use a dip in a lake.

Solli shivered, and Natti patted her.

"We have our crossbow and our knives. Peter has his pistol." Ah, the lightpistol. Would it be wise to brandish the gun? Even when bent on mayhem, Juttahats rarely employed force out of proportion to what they encountered. To fire hotlight would be to invite hotlight in reply.

Solli quickened her pace, outdistancing the cart.

"They're only snooping," said Natti. "Only keeping an eye on human beings. We're used to spectators, aren't we?"

Another ten minutes' tramping brought the players to the shore of a small lake. There, they pitched their pair of tents. Stan sat watching the woods, crossbow laid casually across his lap, while the others kicked off boots (or in Solli's case bark shoes), and stripped off leather breeches or long woollen skirts, linen shirts or cambric blouses. As they waded into the water, arcs of ripples progressed through the gathering dusk. Soarfowl took refuge among reeds. By now the blue chevrons of the birds were grey.

If a Juttahat came to spy on the bathers, what would it see?

Tan was the burliest. He was sandy-haired and fresh-faced. Masks of laughter and of grief were tattooed upon his upper arms. When he was dressed, the insignia were invisible.

Natti's black hair was cropped short, the better to accomodate a skullcap. She had the lithe muscularity of a dancer, a delicate figure reconfigured with sinew. The little globes of her breasts seemed mischievously to flout the regime of the rest of her body—sallow apples each studded with a tiny cherry. On her right breast was a tattoo of a winking eye.

Solli was taller than Natti, and fuller in build. Her hair was ghost-blond, as the idiom put it, and curly like some cherubic child's. Her grandma, when a lass, had worked at a certain *establishment* in the port of Tumio that catered to black sailors from southerly Pootara. The lass had accidentally conceived but had refused offers of *special juice*. A daughter was born, who made a half-way decent marriage later on. Solli was sensitive about this matter. Her skin was the cream of coffee with much milk in it. Solli's breasts were jaunty little gourds, brown nipples angled upward from umber areolas larger than golden Or coins. A broad gold ring pierced one of her nipples.

Peter himself was so nondescript that right after speaking to him strangers would be hard put to remember his whey-face. This anonymity was of no account (or perhaps it was essential!) when he exerted his charisma, causing an audience to see him and his black-camouflaged troupe transfigured into heroes and heroines or villains.

Presently Stan took his turn in the water. His legs and bum were tight. However, he sported a bit of a belly. The slack excess of his hairy chest suggested a female ape about to give suck. Stan's hair was red, though by

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now in the dusk all color had expired. Across the lake a fat harnie bird honked mournfully.

From the larder-box on the cart, Natti brought cheese-bread, cold cabbage rolls, and rye pasties. Last to bathe, Stan had filled a flagon with water to pass around.

Peter and Tan and Solli loved pigs-in-blankets, the baked cabbage leaves wrapped around spiced beef and barley. Natti and Stan preferred slices of sweetfin and pork baked inside rye-dough. All five chewed cheese-bread. The bread squeaked in their mouths as if a playful ventriloquist were nearby.

Presently the stars were glittering. Clouds had mostly departed. The constellations of the harp, the cuckoo, and the cow were all on view. Gassy Otso had risen as high as it ever would, though its moon-cubs couldn't be distinguished. A slim silver bridge arced brightly across the southern sky: the sky-sickle, debris of a long-disintegrated moon.

Even in the gleam from the sickle, lake and shore were only modestly illuminated. The interior of the forest was black as pitch. Ideal conditions for a rehearsal. No need to set up the purple screens or to don leotards and skullcaps.

There was never any rigid text. To write down words (were any of the players able to do so, which they were not) would be to imprison and geld the stallion of inspiration, bridling and bitting it.

"How about *The Maiden and the Serpent-Mage?*" proposed Peter. "A new variant on the tale of Saint Georgi. . . ."

"*Georgi orgy,*" suggested Stan. "This time Georgi kills the serpent who captured the maiden. But Georgi only rescues the maiden in order to ravish her. The violated lass sneaks back to the corpse of the alien snake. She flays the snake and dresses herself in its skin of scales like golden armor. Determined to avenge herself, she sets out for Georgi's keep. But as she travels, the skin clings to her so tightly that she can't peel it off. The dead mage's voice invades her mind. She's the first human being who has ever heard an Isi voice in her head—the way the Jutties hear their masters' voices directing them. That serpent had truly loved her—"

"That's far-fetched," said Natti.

"What does our spy in the forest think about this?" Tan asked loudly. There was no answer—not as yet.

"Why should the serpent always be a male?" demanded Solli. "Why not a *female* mage? She captures the maiden in order to lure Georgi. When Georgi comes, the serpent tries to seduce and enslave him with her overpowering fragrance."

"Her yeasty odors," mused Peter. "Her menstrual scents. If we evoke those—"

"Will Georgi yield to me?" In the sickle-light Solli's gaze lingered on Tan.

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None of the five were lovers. They knew each other too well, or so they thought. Their relationship was too familiar, as if they were five siblings. Lust is spawned mainly by the imagination. What hidden mysteries were there for these five to imagine? Love represents an abnormal degree of attention paid to the object of desire. In their dramatic roles each of the players became the focus of heightened attention on the part of the audience. Each became an idol—autonomous and self-contained (even if it was Peter who empowered them to project illusions). Idol did not fall in love with idol.

How different from the humanoid Juttahats! Jutties were entirely subordinate to the Isi snakes. Juttahats carried their Isi masters like proud golden tubas when the snakes left their great underground nests (a rare occurrence). Jutties ran enigmatic errands of mischief for the Isi. The snakes controlled their servants through voices in the head.

Did Solli wish to mimic an Isi mage as a way of influencing those lurkers in the woods to behave themselves? Or was she trying to steer Tan into a new role, of servant to her wishes?

Surely they all knew each other far too well. Though, since the recent visit to Kip'an'keep and their private performance for the Forest Lord's daughter Tilly, Solli had been acting a bit oddly. Had something happened in Kip'an'keep—to Solli but not to the others? Something which now spooked her? People could succumb to obsessions. To bees buzzing in their bonnets.

Peter's scrutiny of Solli by sickle-light failed to enlighten him.

Solli pestered. "Why shouldn't I act the Isi mage to Tan's Georgi? Why should I be the maiden in distress again? Why should I be the ravished one?"

"We *could* rehearse something entirely different," said Natti.

"No, no," said Peter. "Seems to me there's an impulse to do Georgi and Serpent and Maiden." *Get to the root of this.* "Let's improvise."

Like some conductor of a tango orchestra, he waved his hands, harmonizing his troupe, invoking his gift.

"*Let the sway*
"*Steer the play,*" he called softly.
"*Let's find*
"*What's in our mind:*
"*The panorama*
"*Of the drama.*"

Then the five of them began to weave an outline, in a mounting rapture of mutual inspiration. Tan was Georgi, of course. Natti was the captured maiden, the bait for bold Georgi. Stan was the maiden's distressed father. Peter was the Juttahat body-servant of the female snake and enchantress. Solli was that mage.

No audience was present (except perhaps an alien snooper or two, behind trees), but the enchantment became almost as powerful as if many

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spectators were here. Soon Peter seemed indeed to be a Juttahat—who had sneaked from the fringe of the forest to replace the maestro. Solli glistened in the sickle-light, a silvery version of a serpent, rearing upward upon her coils. Tan wore phantom armor. Presently he must discard his armor, reluctantly, piece by piece. Solli lisped and hissed insinuatingly. Her words seemed to arise inside the heads of the others rather than being spoken aloud.

Thus the proto-play wove itself—a drama of dominance and desire, of fears and gallantry and alien mystery, of father-love and fortune-hunting, of abduction, of indecent molestation by a body-servant, of attempted seduction and enslavement by a giant fragrant snake.

Not only the shoreline but the whole lake seemed to have become an arena of somber sand where serpents might bask and glide. The constellations were lights in the roof of a subterranean dome.

Afterward, Peter brought a bottle of blueberry liqueur from the cart. As the dark bottle circulated, each player seemed to be drinking essence of night.

A branch snapped under a foot. The sharp crack must be deliberate—unless the snooper was clumsy and stupid. Juttahats were nimble, except when exhausted. Maybe the play had mesmerized this one. Tan cocked the crossbow in warning.

"Being truce," called a voice from the trees. "Being tranquil. Being peace, being placid." Was the Juttahat trying to sway them? How absurd. No Juttahat could ever cast a sway. Jutties were under the sway of the snakes. Still, the Juttie was doing its best to lull them.

Was a colleague covering it at this moment with a crossbow that fired explosive bullets, a little bonus of firepower to match the superior number of human beings present? Tan's bow only fired ordinary quarrels.

"May as well see what it wants," drawled Peter.

"Odd choice of timing," Stan said. "Waiting till night."

"It's trying to minimize its alienness." Solli stated this for a fact. "In the dark it'll look almost normal."

"But not sound normal!" Tan imitated: "-ing, -ing, -ing." He chuckled. "No sense of timing, or of time. Perpetual present. How can creatures have any sense of history when they don't have any independence?"

"It's time," said Peter, "for actors to speak in tongues." He called out toward the forest: "Be coming forth in safety, Servant of Snakes."

A figure approached slowly. Its livery glinted in the sickle-light as if phosphorescing. On one shoulder was a black glyph like a roosting vesperbird. You could hardly distinguish the oddities: the thin nostrils that opened and closed as if this person were aquatic in origin, the prim mouth, the gland-slits on its chin from which liquid beads leaked—of apprehension or appeasement or inducement?—and the nictitating membranes that slid often across the golden eyes.

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The Juttahat might almost have been a man. How it must rile the snakes that men and women failed to heed their mental sendings and obey them similarly.

"Admiring your performance," announced the intruder. "Much admiring!" Underlying its words were hisses and clicks, as if in ironic commentary. "Admiring so deeply," continued the Juttahat, "that my masters are inviting you all to be performing the selfsame drama in their nest."

"*What?*" cried Peter in astonishment. "*Saying what?*"

The Juttahat repeated the invitation, and then added, "Payment being fifty golden Ors, plus yourselves being in the presence of an appreciative Isi mage."

Fifty Ors. Quite a sum. Not a fortune. Certainly an inducement. Aliens had little use for human money. They acquired it, by trade, by robbery. Contingency funds. . . . Here, so it seemed, was an imperative contingency.

Solli caught her breath. Natti exclaimed, "It's a lure for dupes!"

"Hang on, Natti," said Peter. "Now just hang on."

This business must have been simmering for a while. The Isi must have been gleaning news about Peter Vaara and his troupe. Most likely, cuckoo-birds had been telling tales and reciting passages from plays. No one knew the motives of cuckoos, though people relied on their gossip. The birds could easily be swayed to carry a message—"*Coo-coo, coo-coo, sing the story, tell the tale!*"—although they could never be made to cackle about themselves. Some people thought that the big scrawny green birds with their cat-like ears were really spies of the Isi, more pervasive spies than the Jutties. But no one ever harmed a cuckoo. That would be bad luck. The worst of luck.

"This is a remarkable opportunity," Peter said.

For a dramatist to see inside an Isi nest, and to come close to serpents! Such a stimulation to the imagination! Their plays would gain such authenticity.

"It's a trap," insisted Natti.

"I *want* to mimic a mage," said Solli. "Wasn't that the whole idea? Now I shall do so perfectly."

"Refusal being impossible," said the Juttahat. "Already a sky-boat coming here to be carrying yourselves and your cart peacefully to the Brazen Isi nest."

"*Indeed!*"—from Peter.

"Indeed," replied the alien. "Much admiring your performance."

The alternative would be to take to their heels through the inky woods, abandoning their cart—risking bashing their brains out on low branches. These Juttahats might be equipped with night-eye goggles.

"We need to sleep on this, Snake-Servant," growled Stan. "Mainly, we need to *sleep*."

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Hard to be sure in the gloom, but did the alien's chin-glands leak, did its dimples pucker? Was that the equivalent of a smile?

"Sky-boat landing, sky-boat waiting, leaving at dawn. Myself sleeping in woods."

Oh yes, to keep watch—so that they did not sneak out of their tents, except for a pee.

Engines boomed. Jets of air buffeted the lake. A glaring searchlight illuminated sand and tents. Five heads looked out, blinking, to gain the impression of a long fuselage with dark round portholes and swept-back delta wings. Fluted pipes and vanes adorned the vessel. Slowly it settled upon the shore, the focus of its searchlight shrinking and brightening as if to burn a disc of sand to glass before winking out. . . .

While the players were in Kip'an'keep, they had given several performances in town, and then a final nocturnal show in the tree-garden on the hill to the east. In fact, they had pitched their tents inside the leafy park itself (with the permission of a granny at the gate, and for a silver half-mark), rather than using a more expensive hostelry.

This arboretum was Lord Kippan's pride, but it was freely open to the public. Kippan himself was a recluse, who never roamed his own park. In summer lovers would go to the park of an evening. Sometimes they would spend the whole night. Sweethearts wouldn't dream of carving hearts or tokens in any trunk. The penalty for defacing a tree in the park was that the culprit's own face would be deformed. Clamped in a mask of charmed mootapu wood, the miscreant's features would mutate to match the grotesquery of the mask. Nobody wanted this to happen to themselves, although a few freakish faces seen on the streets of Kip'an'keep suggested that a besotted lover took the risk occasionally. Later, maybe his girl took offense, or became furious at finding herself pregnant or spurned, and peached on him.

Several bizarre species of tree grew only in Kippan's domain. The carny tree, for instance. With its sticky resin, a carny could trap and digest birds. Unlike the more widespread leper tree, which would lean away from contact, a carny would jerk its boughs toward a victim. This posed no problem to people who could easily pull themselves loose! Unless, of course, they were roped to a carny, which was another penalty for misconduct down Kippan way. . . . .

Even odder was the mootapu tree. The fermented sap of the mootapu could give you a two-day hangover, but the *raw* sap (along with a powerful sway by a shaman) could alter a person radically. As everyone knew, this sap was responsible for the transmutation of some volunteers from among Lord Kippan's troops literally into woodmen, wooden soldiers. Those warriors would live as long as any tree. They would dream bliss-

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fully while dormant. They would arouse, and be flexible, mobile, and supremely resilient, impervious to cold, resistant to injury. Mootapu sap remodeled people.

The arboretum boasted two examples of every tree and bush, though never as neighbors. There were two fireproof purple tammies, two inflammable minties (within little moats), two hoary hard sylvesters, two ivorywoods, two musktrees, two larixes with henna scales, two veras with green needles . . . oh, the list was as long as a woodman's life.

Solli had asked the crone at the gate where a mootapu tree could be seen.

Third path on yer left, second path on yer right. Mind you don't go scooping any resin for a pretty bead to hang off yer ear, or yer ear might turn into a goat's, hee-hee—

Peter had bought fish pasties from Granny. Their camp site was close to the gate. No one need fear pilferers in this park. The troupe enjoyed a fine vista westward across the town, and a sidelong view of the keep and timber forts to the south.

Kip'an'keep town was laid out in a grid of houses between a cool lake and a smaller hot one from which a geyser erupted regularly every two hours. Carved gables and porches were vividly painted. Elevated boardwalks lined plank-paved streets. Trees sprouted from behind every home. Above a grove of stout stilt-trees bulged the onion dome of the Kirk-in-the-Trees.

The Lord's tammywood keep, with its tiers of verandas, resembled a purple chest of drawers, all partly open, with a dome on top. Bridges led to lodges and minor manors. One of the surrounding prefabricated forts was being dismantled and reconstructed. Tapper Kippan was paranoid about his security.

The evening was fair. Clouds were breaking up. The red flush of imminent sunset only extended a modest way across the sky, promising blithe weather. Foliage in the park was also beginning to acquire a sunset palette.

After eating their pasties, the players had set out to visit the mootapu tree. Solli linked arms with Tan as though they were amorous promenaders. For the sake of symmetry, Natti linked with Stan.

Peter brought up the rear. Idly he studied the two couples, who weren't actually couples. His troupe, his family. The channels for his gift. How innocent everything seemed.

Not that magic-drama was exactly an innocent activity! Magic-drama deeply affected the minds of spectators. It induced illusions. It aroused passions. The players themselves were hardly immune, but control was part of Peter's gift. Guidance and direction.

Of beige vellum bark, the mootapu tree sprawled in all directions as if

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it hadn't the backbone to stand upright. Stout lower branches leaned knuckles and elbows upon the soil. The lower limbs were quite vast, and hosted sulphurous bracket fungi. Orange resin leaked through the vellum, congealing into ambery pendants. Springy slim shoots of feathery foliage, of a fading pea-green, surged upward—as though saplings of a different species were grafted on to the great base.

A freckled red-headed girl was balancing on one of the great slumping boughs. She was about seven years old, and wore a simple linen shift. Her twin brother, dressed in shirt and shorts, was prodding at the girl's ankles with a long twig, trying to trip her. Beware those pools of resin! The girl shifted from foot to foot. Her expression was halfway between excitement and panic. Which way would she tip? Into taunting triumph, or into shrieks and tears?

Their mother came hurrying through the nearby shrubs. The woman wore a frayed green gown trimmed with orange and purple felt. Her auburn hair, tied in a bun, seemed dull compared with that of her offspring.

"Oh here you both are! Minkie, don't you go poking her like that! *Be careful, Tammy!* Stand still and I'll pick you down. How dare you, Tammy—!"

"Minkie dared me, Mum—"

The woman scowled at the players.

"Couldn't you lot have stopped her?"

"We only just arrived here," said Peter, reasonably.

Tammy's mother reached up her arms. "Jump now, jump well clear."

As Tammy did so, her white shift rode up her thin bare legs and thighs. Hastily her mother set the girl down. She berated the players.

"Five grown people, who couldn't put a stop to kids' jinks!"

Peter was irked. "Madam, I notice that you named your girl after the fireproof tree!"

"What of it? She were born with fiery hair."

"And you wouldn't want her to be hot-headed, would you? But Minkie, your boy . . . that's very like the name of the Minty tree that bursts into flames."

"*What of it?* Are you some fortune-teller?"

Peter shrugged, but Natalya piped up.

"You give your lad license to be naughty, lady. Yet your girl must behave herself. What do you expect will happen? Why did you tell him not to poke her? Why use that word?"

The mother flushed. She covered the girl's ears with her hands. "That's disgusting!"

"You're storing up trouble," said Natti.

Incensed, the woman seized her children and hauled them away.

"You know what's going on," Natti called after her.

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When mother and children had gone, Stan said, "Phew, that was a bit stiff."

"So was the lad's little twig," said Natti. "I could see. It isn't funny. The girl wasn't even wearing knickers. If she stains her shift on some moss, oh dear, I can imagine the fuss! Woman like that infuriates me. Causing problems, and willfully blind to them."

Solli spoke up. "It'll be the girl who survives. The tammy tree endures fires. One day her brother will flare up and people will quench him. The girl will cope. She'll be the winner."

"Frankly," said Natti, "I doubt that." She eyed Solli curiously.

The next morning, they toured Kip'an'Keep, found a suitable hall which wasn't already booked for some tango band, and hired a crier to roam through the plank streets and along the boardwalks announcing, "*Kaleva's greatest dramaturge Peter Vaara is in town with his troupe. Come witness the tale of Tycho the Tyrant, Tycho the Tormenter. . . .*"

Cuckoos had cackled aplenty about Tycho Cammon's cruelties and ravishings. Still, it was daring—even rash—of Peter to present a show featuring that very unsavory lord. Admittedly Tycho's domain was hundreds of keys north-eastwards—way beyond Yulistalax. But Yulistalax happened to be where Gala took place every autumn. A troupe of players worth their salt ought to be performing at Yulistalax. Tycho Cammon would also be putting in an appearance at Speakers' Valley, to exert his will over any challengers. Cammon could will a contestant's head to burst apart.

What if he heard a cuckoo cackle that strolling players had been taking his name in vain? He might ignore the truce that prevailed during Gala (so long as you weren't standing upon the central hillock of Speakers' Stage). He might indulge in some ghastly revenge.

"Alternatively he might be pleased at how well-known his infamy is." Peter had said this a fortnight earlier when he first suggested staging such a crowd-pulling show. "Tyrants are usually exhibitionists."

Solli had taken a dim view. Was Peter right in the head? The troupe wouldn't dare go near Gala this year! Natti, however, felt that Cammon's crimes oughtn't to be swept under a carpet because of cowardice—even if audiences might merely enjoy the thrills rather than be moved to indignation. Eventually Solli was talked around.

"Somebody will trounce Cammon," Peter had affirmed, as if their little magic-drama might in some way contribute to the tyrant's eventual downfall. "Perhaps even at this year's Gala!" Which, now, they could not risk attending. . . .

Nor, in fact, had they attended Gala the previous year either. They had been over in the far west. Back then, the troupe had been together for less than a year. Earlier than that, Peter had performed solo—and then suddenly his gift had burgeoned.

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In town, they gave three performances of *Tycho the Tyrant* to much acclaim, sending shivers down spines. The motive for the final evening performance up at the park was that someone important from the keep might attend. Not the recluse himself! Maybe one of his three bailiffs. A patron was always useful.

And someone important *did* turn up, chaperoned by a taciturn wooden soldier with a lightrifle slung over one shoulder. Tilly Kippan, the Forest Lord's youngest daughter, came to the show. . . .

Among bushes which were losing their definition in the dying light, illusions were particularly persuasive. The audience ooh-ed and aah-ed as Tan, in the role of Tycho, strutted and menaced and leered, and became for them utterly the brutal lustful bully.

"That's *him* and no mistaking! He's here—!"

"Ooh, cuddle me, Carl, hold me tight—!"

Some of those present may have traveled to Gala and seen Tycho in the flesh. Most of the audience would have heard descriptions. In their collective enchantment they all beheld the heavy jowls and fat self-indulgent lips of the brute.

Gallant Stan stood in Cammon's way. Cammon lusted for Stan's sister—portrayed by Solli, who now was a gorgeous beauty. Tycho tormented Stan. He made him a puppet of his will—until his sister begged mercy and promised herself to the bully. Natti, who was Solli's mother, summoned a witch to help her family. Here was a whole sub-theme. Natti became the witch—and Tycho withered her. Solli's mother summoned an enchanter—Peter—pledging all the family wealth. Here was another sub-theme.

Tycho paralyzed Peter and made his head explode. How the blood and brains sprayed into the air. Spectators threw up their arms to shelter themselves. The tyrant locked the frantic mother inside a cage. Everyone saw the cage rise up from the ground and swing to and fro. In various discreet guises the spectators saw Cammon have his way with Solli, who was obliged to protest her delight at his indecencies.

When Tycho was sated, he transformed her brave brother into wood (which Kip'an'keepers could appreciate). Next, he softened the ground to quicksand. Stan sank down into the sand, where he would remain alive though paralyzed. This was Tycho's fulfillment of his promise to spare Solli's brother. This was his guarantee of her slavish submissiveness.

Meanwhile, from her dangling cage, old Natti, now crazy, cried fitful curses. Actually, Natti sounded and seemed not unlike a cuckoo. Attracted by the magic and the furor, one of those kettle-sized birds had indeed settled in a nearby tree to scrutinize the spectacle and hark with cocked ears.

By starlight and sicklelight the show ended, with bows. Tan was no

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longer a monster. Nor was Solli so totally ravishing. Nor was Natti hanging in midair. Nor was Stan buried alive, to the relief of all present.

That wooden soldier, who was dressed in a uniform of brown bark, lit a fish-oil lantern and escorted a young lady forward.

How impassive the soldier, how immobile the grainy texture of his hard ruddy face illuminated by the lantern. How animated the young woman by comparison, and how soft-featured. She could only be sixteen or seventeen. Loose golden tresses. A broad face, and a generous brow. A gown of innumerable leaf patterns, as if woven from foliage. A necklace of wine-dark gems. Fine garnets, by the look of those.

"That was awful," she began. "The oppression . . ."

"I hope we didn't offend innocent ears—" Peter began hastily.

"No, on the contrary: *congratulations!*"

She was Tilly Kippan, and she had a request. She hoped that the troupe might visit her privately the next day. No, not at the keep itself. Her father might take alarm. But in Maids' Manor, adjoining the keep. That was where Tilly resided. A guard would come in the morning to guide them.

The five of them were shown into a chamber that was bare of furniture except for a tall pink-tiled stove. Several layers of muslin veiled a window. A large rug occupied most of the floor. On the far side of the rug, Tilly knelt upon a velvet cushion, green as moss. On the hither side, a line of five such cushions awaited her guests.

"Would you mind kneeling down? Just like me!"

The rug was woven with little silhouettes of trees, and a maze of pathways. Here and there stood tiny wooden dolls, as well as a scattering of pebbles of lapis and onyx and agate. *Dolls!* Had they been brought to this room to play at dolls with the Forest Lord's daughter? Was the lass retarded? A frowned creased Natti's face, but Solli beamed.

"I'll bet those dolls are so much more than they seem!"

And they were indeed.

To say that the dolls were Tilly's true friends might convey an impression of alienated inadequacy that wouldn't begin to do justice to the richness of her imaginative life, as she soon revealed it, in confidence.

It was over two years since Tilly first began telling herself a complicated tale of friendships and quarrels and of love and betrayal, using those miniature dolls as her players. She would move the dolls around in a complex choreography. She would imitate their voices. Those chips of agate and onyx gave her characters the power to cast a magical sway or to be rescued from a sway. The game was ingenious and intricate. Tilly herself was so fresh, so exuberant—and also nonchalant, with hardly any trace of obsessiveness.

She wished for Peter to cast a sway so that for an hour or two she

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might enter directly into this melodrama of hers upon the big mat. The players would adopt the personae of her dolls. She also would become one. She wanted the elaborate woodland with all its pathways to become as real as life to her.

Instead of magnifying themselves, Peter and his players must miniaturize themselves. Instead of projecting themselves outwardly, they must internalize themselves, as it were.

Solli clapped her hands delightedly. "Oh yes, oh yes. . . !"

Well, Peter could always *try*. . . .

Scurrying through the forest of mysteries, seeking a gleaming boulder of power. . . .

Enchanted by love for the lass he'd lost, wrestling with a shape-changing rival by a riverbank. . . .

The abducted maiden escaping by swimming a lake. . . .

On a fine white steed, blowing the horn of summons. . . .

Cocking that crossbow, while the gale tore leaves from the trees. . . .

It was a tale in which one might become trapped, if Tilly Kippan had been deluded. More problematic was that Peter and his players relied on exaggeration. There were so many sensitive subtleties and and implications. Tilly had outlined themes and characters, but the outcome could only be caricature and travesty. To improvise on such scanty acquaintance with the tangled tale—or rather, such lack of acquaintance—was hopeless.

Nevertheless, when the sway subsided, Tilly seemed joyful. She gazed at Peter, then at Solli. Solli's eyes were moist with mutuality, as if she had experienced a profound emotional communion.

"It was so inadequate," apologized Peter. Oh, he was self-critical now—even though judgment had deserted him in the matter of Tycho Cammon. Perhaps he feared a fit of petulance from this daughter of a Lord.

Tilly nodded. "I *knew* it would be. I did at least experience the landscape of my little friends! For that, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"Ah, well," said Peter.

How warmly Solli smiled at Tilly.

"I don't need to do this again," Tilly said. "But please, do stay a day longer at the arboretum. Let me visit you. I want—"

Did she want to run away with players? Did she think of putting all her dolls and lucky stones in a bag and rolling up her rug to sling over her shoulder?

She laughed lightly.

"I want to sense how your gift—" She couldn't explain in words. Evidently she wanted to know how to enter even more intensely into her

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game. Tilly shrugged. "I couldn't leave Kip'an'keep. I couldn't leave my father." She seemed to know exactly what they might have been thinking. With irony rather than irritation, she added, "Go away? Wed a husband? Why should I wed when my friends are here, forever falling in love and out of love?"

The troupe could hardly refuse her request when the arboretum where they were camping belonged to the Forest Lord himself. As for the story-game, they would not see *that* again. The game had become private once more.

Tilly visited the troupe for several hours, without any guard to accompany her. She strolled for a long while with Peter in the park; and then with Natti; and finally with Solli—though with neither Tan nor Stan.

In retrospect, it seemed to be Solli in whom Tilly had confided the most—not about her game but about her parents. Tilly's dad had gained longlife, but subsequently he had locked himself away like a miser. Her mother became increasingly embittered. Tapper Kippan doted on Tilly, but no longer showed any affection to his wife. Perhaps this was because Edith Kippan was manifestly growing older, unlike Tapper. Tapper's neglect of Edith would hardly sweeten her countenance or her temperament.

Stan had a question for Solli. "They don't call him Tapper because his longlife happened in the same way as with those wooden soldiers, by him tapping the sap of the mootapu tree?"

Solli seemed startled. She exclaimed, "Don't you know, anything, Stan! Tapper's a longlife because he married one of the Queen's daughters! Those all give longlife to the first man who beds them. Unless," she whispered theatrically, "the bridegroom becomes a *zombie*."

"Oh, I *know* that, Solli. I just thought that in Tapper's case maybe the mootapu sap had *something* to do with it—"

"Well, it doesn't!" How brusque Solli was. To soften this, she said, "Forget about trees! Tilly told me a secret. She fears her Dad's becoming addicted to a drug from a *fungus*. The drug's euphoric. It changes his sense of time. Don't tell anyone."

"I don't think we'll be dramatizing Tapper Kippan's life," said Peter. "It seems a bit static."

Solli couldn't help exclaiming, "Unlike Tycho's!"

After a briefer visit on the morning after—during which Tilly went off for a while with Solli—they were all free to leave.

Tilly rewarded the troupe with a purse of silver Marks. She wasn't exorbitant, just moderately generous. She also gave Solli and Natti each a pair of laced bark shoes that were at once elegant and practical. Unfortunately, Natti's pair were a little too large for her, so she changed back into her boots as soon as Tilly had left. Solli wore her own new shoes happily on the hike away from Kip'an'keep.

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* * *

Thick morning-mist hung over lake and shore, confusing perception. It was if the troupe had awoken from troubled dreams into another dream. Vague figures in golden livery were moving around a craft of vanes and propellors and antennae and fluted side-pipes. Unreal, unreal. The five might have been sucked into someone else's illusion, an alien illusion.

A Juttahat stood watching while the players breakfasted on cheese and smoked sausages.

Then the tents were packed. Two Juttahats wheeled the cart to the rear of the sky-boat. They pushed it up a cargo ramp between the tail propellors.

It was time to enter the boat. To inhale alien odors. To perch upon padded seats that weren't quite shaped for human bums. To wear straps.

Engines roared. Air intakes shrieked. The fuselage throbbed as though it might shake apart. Then the vessel rose upward, out of the woolly mist into sunlight—and into sudden sight through portholes of a reversed and diminished world where for a while all the trees seemed upside-down until one got used to being above them instead of below them.

They arrived over a sizeable gap in the forest: a vacancy filled by flat mist. A lake might almost be present beneath that white veil. An impossible, perfectly circular lake.

Two tiny islands (which couldn't be islands) protruded above the mist, bronze and glistening. Domes. Hoods for heavy guns.

Juddering and hissing, the sky-boat descended into the mist. The vessel continued sinking. Sinking into the earth itself.

Suddenly, yellow light flooded forth, illuminating a cavern. A roof was flowing back into position overhead. Another sky-boat stood nearby—and several smaller flying-pods.

"We're inside a serpents' nest," hissed Solli. The shivering thrill that affected audiences was theirs to experience now.

En route to their temporary quarters, down curves of descending tunnels, they gaped at grottoes and crypts and underground gardens, at a chamber floored with golden sand where a serpent lay basking, at a workshop where liveried Jutties labored over throbbing machines. Such chimes and twangs! The nest might have been a vast clock. Soft yellow light diffused from panels in ceilings and walls. Juttahats chirped and hissed at one another. Junior Jutties in golden lamé elastic suits scampered, curious about the visitors and the cart that followed them. Their curiosity never became intrusive. It seemed controlled. How fruity the warm dry air smelled.

The quarters were a large chamber. Orange and yellow tiles covered half of the floor. The rest of the space was devoted to a garden. Tiled

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paths snaked among bushes with gaudily patterned leaves such as they had never seen before. A cubicle in one wall would shower hot water, then jet hot air. Another cubicle was a crouch-toilet. Shoe-slots flanked a hole in the floor, which hummed when you stood on the slots. Some kind of moist fabric for wiping oneself poked from a dispenser. A cabinet dispensed chilled flasks of sweetened water; another cabinet, warm cakes of food. Half a dozen padded chairs could be elongated into couches to sleep upon.

They were to perform in this chamber late that afternoon. Then they would all enjoy a night's rest (if they could sleep) before their return to the lake.

Peter was loath to mount another rehearsal in case a serpent might be spying through some lens. The subsequent impact of the show could be lessened.

"I *wonder*," he said, "whether we oughtn't to put on the tale of Tycho Cammon instead of Saint Georgi?"

"Why?" Solli demanded.

"It's just that imitating an Isi mage in front of one—"

"—might be unconvincing?" she interrupted. "I say we ought to have the courage to try it!"

"It's you who'll be in that role—"

"And *you'll* be a Juttie, whom I'll be *seeming* to control." She smiled sweetly. "You aren't worried about that, maestro?"

"What I was going to say, Solli, is that in such unusual circumstances some sort of echo might arise. . . . The audience might influence *you* instead of vice versa!"

"I'm not worried. Your gift will enfold me, Peter."

Natti said, "The Isi are obviously interested in how Peter's gift works. They may imagine he controls us like puppets on a string. Can they learn the secret? Can they copy the trick? If *you* identify closely with a serpent, the serpent might identify a bit too closely with you. . . ."

"I said I'm not scared!"

"It was you who didn't want us to stage the Tycho show."

"I was wrong, wasn't I! We need to assert ourselves here. How better than by swaying a snake to believe that I *am* a serpent?"

Very soon after, a Juttahat entered the chamber and announced: "Your performance tonight being the same as you were practicing beside the lake." It wasn't a question, but a statement. Having spoken, the Juttahat left. The annoucement *might* merely have been a reminder rather than proof of surveillance.

So instead of rehearsing they played cards.

"—ten o' diamonds!"

"—Queen of Ice!"

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"—Ace in the hole—!"

Solli strolled slowly around the shrubbery with Tan. She lingered often, showing intense interest in the big lurid leaves. She would catch hold of Tan to direct his attention to this pattern or that. Now and then he laughed. She was pretending that the leaves from an alien world were maps of that alien world. She might almost be courting him.

Peter lay, eyeing the two. *What was she up to?*

Now and then, members of the troupe might enjoy a casual fling with some stranger. A sauna liaison, so to speak. Almost an aspect of personal hygiene. None of the troupe had shown any such inclination toward one another. Their professional relationship worked so much better without that kind of intimacy.

Stan was a stocky tub on stilty legs. Sometimes he looked like a plump bird, when he flapped his arms and strutted and puffed out his chest so that his flab seemed to consist of powerful pectoral muscles. No doubt Tan was more physically appealing. When Tan's shirt was off—to chop firewood or whatever—those wonderful tattoos of smiling and frowning faces would seem about to speak aloud as sinew rippled under the pigmented skin.

Was Solli appointing Tan her special protector in this alien nest? Or had she made up her mind to seduce him?

Peter was puzzled.

Natti was watching, too. She frowned at Peter, but they could hardly exchange confidences.

Stan was snoozing.

The troupe donned their matte black leotards and skullcaps. Presently, thirty-odd liveried Juttahats filed into the chamber. The Jutties sat down in two rows along the edge of the shrubbery, opposite the pair of purple screens.

Now here came the serpent, borne by its body-servant.

The servant's hands formed a cradle for a stout scaly tail. A glittering body, ochre and ruddy, looped twice around its bearer like some hefty brass-band instrument. The serpent was fanfare incarnate. Its horned head rested upon its porter's fuzzy cranium. A thin tongue flicked in and out, tasting the air. Eyes of jet gazed, clever and commanding.

The bearer stationed himself with his master behind the seated Juttahats, just inside the shrubbery. An odor of caramel drifted from the serpent. A scent of anticipation? Who could say?

"This precious enlightened one being *Imbricate,*" announced the porter-and-Voice. Presumably the serpent itself was performing this immodest introduction by mental ventriloquism.

Imbricate meant *overlap*. The serpent's scales weren't particularly like

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shingles on a roof. The name might refer to an intricate, crafty frame of mind.

Peter replied, "Being honored. We are presenting for your pleasure the spectacle of Saint Georgi, the captive maiden, and the serpent. Commencing shortly."

Again, a reek of caramel. Peter breathed in, to marshal his gift.

"Wait a moment!" So saying, Solli hurried behind the screens.

After a moment's hesitation, Natti darted to peer.

Solli had yanked a little green bottle from her knapsack in the cart. She pulled out a stopper. She gulped.

Must be some fine liqueur from Kip'an'keep. A gift from Tilly Kippan—in addition to the shoes, which had fitted Solli but not Natti. Solli *had* ingratiated herself.

Tiptoeing swiftly, Natti hissed, "Give us a swig. I can use some spirit too—"

Panic possessed Solli. She upended the bottle, glug-glug. Then she smirked at Natti.

Solli was back on stage again, serene and detached. Very soon Natti would be the captive maiden. The audience wasn't restless.

"Peter, Peter," whispered Natti, "Solli just drank some mootapu sap—"

"*What?*"

"I'm sure of it."

Yes, that must have been sap in the bottle.

Solli may only have meant to sip a few drops, to enhance her performance. Not so that she should change her body, but that she might embellish the illusion enormously.

Tapper Kippan's daughter would have been able to ignore the rules of the Arboretum and tap a tree for sap. . . . Oh the naïveté!

"It must be because of the Pootaran blood in her, Peter. She must fear that she doesn't possess enough glitter. That she might be losing her flair—"

The black inhabitants of Pootara were an unmagical lot. They resisted enchantments, recoiled from sways. Solli must always have feared that in her blood there lurked a foreign current of unmagic.

There'd been no sign of her losing her flair! Quite on the contrary. Ah, people could so easily nurse bees in the bonnet, absurd obsessions. . . .

"Silly child!" exclaimed Peter. "Whatever will happen to her? How can I minimize—"

Peter's gift wasn't to minimize. It was to maximize.

"How can I steer her safely?" Oh why had she insisted on the role of an Isi mage, who would be exerting control over its body-servant, played by Peter himself?

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Peter stared at Solli. She smiled back triumphantly. It was utterly out of the question to cancel, or even to delay the show.

Faint bubbles of pastel light, pink and blue, puffed from the mage's horns. The serpent was exerting its own gift—to savor Peter's sway, or to interfere with it? Golden droplets oozed from its fangs. Its servant's chin-glands dribbled liquid pearls. Alien nostrils valved open and shut. Odors of cinnamon and kasta nuts were intoxicating. The two ranks of seated Juttahats swayed slowly forward, slowly back. They might have been rowers on the benches of a boat, with the mage as the helmsman. They might have been victims of constipation yearning for release.

Stan, as the kidnapped maiden's dad, seemed to be far away. An illusion of distance dwarfed him. He was a tiny shrunken figure alternating between hope and despair.

Peter was clad in golden livery—the very image of any of the Juttahats in the audience. Gripping Natti, he offered her to Tan-Georgi. Then he snatched her away. By this means he lured the would-be hero onward deeper into a labyrinth. Natti attracted Tan with her cries. At the command of his serpent-master Peter was molesting Natti.

"Ravishing, ravishing," Peter chanted. He fondled and coerced the maiden. Odors of yeast and vanilla wafted from the serpent at the edge of the shrubbery. Solli seemed to rear upright upon a base of coils, spangled and glistening. She swayed to and fro. Her own black-clad body wasn't visible. Illusion prevailed. Such a seductive illusion, here in the presence of the Isi prototype! Solli was a living mirror of the mage.

Her voice was lilting and sing-song, almost a telepathic alien voice, as one must imagine it.

She warbled at Peter, "Slave, be serving this exalted one!"

Peter staggered. How compelling his master's voice was! Abnormally so. He hardly knew his own identity.

"Be serving!"

Peter clung to Natti as a man in a sudden gale might hug a tree. The Isi mage was trying to manipulate Peter with its mind while he was in an exalted state, detached from himself. But *which* serpent was trying to overwhelm him and steal away his will power? Was it the actual serpent or the imitation one? Or was it both at once?

"Georgi," the false serpent lilted, "be coming! Becoming my lover! Spurning the weak and tender maiden!"

Natti struggled against a sway that was enfeebling her. Tan stumbled slowly onward, mesmerized by the mock-mage.

"Submitting, submitting!" sang the Solli-serpent.

Was the Isi mage using Solli as a channel of control? Or was it Solli's own desire that was prevailing?

Wild power swirled around Peter, plucking at his soul. Fragrances

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dazed him. He was no longer the master of his gift. Soon, a voice might speak within his head—an imperative, undeniable voice.

But then the Solli-serpent began to shake convulsively.

She cried out, "Holding me!"

Hold her? How? In what way? Hold her as a Juttahat-porter held its serpent master?

Of a sudden, the Solli-serpent fell. She writhed upon the tiles, seeming even more snake-like in her flexings.

Natti shed angry tears over Solli's distorted body. The legs and arms of Solli's leotard had meshed with her flesh. Her flesh had begun to flow through the fabric. Her legs had started to blend together, her arms to fuse with her torso. Her face was no longer human. She was some mutant freak in a sideshow—a snake-woman. The sway had evaporated, but the sap had altered her—half-way altered her!

Kneeling, Stan draped an arm around Natti's shoulder.

"She's dead—"

"Bastard!" Natti cried. At Stan, for his bluntness? At the mage in the audience? At Solli herself?

No longer puffing out bubbles of light or fragrances, the serpent craned its head above its porter's cranium. Then it lowered its scaly chin to rest once more upon that fuzzy red pad. Was it fatigued? Despondent?

The Juttahat-Voice blared: "Regrets! Deep regrets." After a moment it added: "Reciprocity and compensation!"

Compensation? A hundred golden Ors instead of the promised fifty?

Some Juttahats had produced light-pistols. If Tan or Stan or Peter or Natti or all of them together flew into a homicidal rage, weapons would protect the precious one even if massed muscle-power failed.

Two Juttahats hurried from the chamber.

"Be waiting, be waiting," coaxed the Voice.

The wait wasn't long.

When the Jutties returned they were hustling a young woman between them. Her eyes were blue. Her cheeks were like little buns. Her cropped hair was honey-blond. She wasn't very tall. Such a pert nose. She was dressed in gold lamé elastic just like a Juttie kid. And she was talking to herself. Even as her eyes widened at the sight of four fellow human beings, she continued to chatter.

"So Sophie was in her cell, busily telling herself the tale of how the sun went missing behind a moon. All the land was dark and dreary—"

At this point, she noticed the corpse. Hard to identify of whom, or of what! Her narration hardly faltered.

"After many adventures, which she'll skip, Sophie succeeded in catching a spear of lightning. She threw this at the moon. The moon shattered

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into millions of pieces. That's the origin of the sickle in the sky. The sun shone forth again upon the world and upon Sophie, altering her hair from black to blond, as of course it would. . . ."

Words continued to spill forth. "So while Sophie was telling the tale, two of her captors came to her underground cell, where the sun never shone. Did they interrupt her flow? Oh no—they were just slaves, after all. They did seize hold of her. Off they marched her, still talking. . . ."

Was this young woman insane? Was this what the serpent meant by reciprocity? That the aliens were offering a demented prisoner as a substitute for Solli? Somebody driven daft by confinement in the serpents' nest and by whatever meddling they had attempted?

However, the players' presence began to figure in the weave of her obsessive narrative.

"When Sophie's captors brought her into the big room where bushes were growing, what should Sophie see there but three men and a woman? And a thing upon the floor, a sort of serpent abortion. . . . The four people looked pretty disturbed. They couldn't have spent a year in captivity, chattering to themselves to keep the snakes confused. . . ."

She was explaining the reason for all this babble.

A tale could trap you if stories began to nest within stories, generating more and more strands till you lost all sense of beginning or ending. Trapped within this nest of aliens, Sophie had evidently ensnared her own mind within this story of hers to protect her individuality from sways and manipulation. The Isi had failed to enslave her—just as Imbricate had failed to sway the troupe, though *that* had been a close shave. Now the Isi wanted rid of Sophie.

Sophie must possess quite a bit of storytelling energy and dramatic flair. . . .

"Reciprocity," said Peter. "Accepting compensation."

Grief would have to wait. And anger too.

On the noisy journey by sky-boat, Sophie kept up her prattle like some deranged cuckoo-bird. If she fell silent, might the vessel veer back toward the nest? Soon they all knew a great deal about plucky Sophie—more than you might wish to know all at once!

The return to the lake was occurring right away. A corpse was involved. No question of spending a night in the nest!

Wrapped in sacking, the body of what had been Solli was in the cargo hold with the cart. Peter had insisted that the promise to return *all* of the troupe should be fulfilled, even if the troupe did now include an additional member. Imbricate had seemed reluctant. The aliens might have liked to dissect Solli to try to explain her alteration. But no, no, no, a promise was a promise. The mage must be mortified by the failure of its attempt to manipulate human minds. The serpent had lost prestige. Accordingly it yielded.

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As to the matter of the fee, why, the performance had been abandoned! The only payment turned out to be custody of a corpse, a typical alien swindle.

Contrariwise, the Isi would never now know about the mootapu sap that Solli had drunk. The snakes would remain mystified. In this regard the aliens had been conned.

A wind had risen. Clouds scudded, revealing and eclipsing stars and parts of the sky-sickle. The ruffled lake was inky. The woods were solid darkness. So far as one could tell, no Jutties from the sky-boat had sneaked into the forest to continue spying. The vessel had departed. The tents had been pitched as much by feel and memory as by sight.

Sophie stopped being a rampant chatterbox. She wasn't irrevocably afflicted. Stan shared out cheese and hard black bread from the cart, to be washed down with water from the lake.

"Shall we bury Solli in the woods in the morning?" he asked. Under the humus and the leaf-litter, for insects to eat.

"No," Peter said. He was still the maestro of the troupe. "Jutties might come back here to find her, dig her up. We'd better wheel her well away from here before we make a grave."

"Damn her!" exclaimed Natti. "It wasn't fear about her talent that caused this. She wanted to be the boss. She wanted to sweep you aside, Peter. She thought that by aping a mage she could ape its powers—and not need you."

"I know. . . ," he said gently. "Still, if she hadn't done as she did, and confused things so much, the mage might have succeeded—though frankly I doubt it."

"You're saying that we should be charitable?"

"I feel bitter too, Natti! Yet part of the bitterness is from the loss of someone so close to us."

"And also so estranged from us," murmured Tan.

Maybe, thought Peter, most intelligences were estranged from one another at heart. Tilly Kippan, immersed in her pretense game. Aliens, alienated from humans. How about players, forever donning different identities? Maybe the root of alienation was that each individual knew that ultimately they would die, as Solli had died—so suddenly. Longlifers such as Tapper Kippan might be the most estranged of all, fearfully protective of their longevity that must surely one day fail. As for wooden soldiers, those might well live as long as a tree, though only by forsaking mortal flesh. . . .

"We should rejoice," Peter said bleakly. "We have a new player. I'm sure we do." To Sophie, in the darkness: "You're so quiet now, my dear."

"It's lovely to hold my tongue at last."

"You don't want to go back to your family?"

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"I'd like to send them a message that I'm safe. When we come across a cuckoo, I'll tell the bird."

After a week or maybe a month, the gossip-bird or one of its kin would babble the news to her folks.

"You're magic-drama actors, aren't you?" she said.

Why, as yet they had hardly even introduced themselves! And she certainly hadn't seen them perform.

"Indeed," replied Peter. "The very best!"

Sophie sniffed the air. "Autumn, isn't it? Are you heading for Gala? Have you already been there?"

"We shan't be performing at Gala this year," said Natti "You see, we've been putting on a show about Tycho the Tyrant—and he'll be there for sure. Oh dear, now I sound like Solli—!"

"I really do need to be an actor," said Sophie. "It's what I need most."

Reciprocity indeed. . . ! Had the serpent forseen this? Had precious Imbricate felt obliged to compensate the troupe perfectly, even though originally it had been intent on enslaving them? Who could understand the motives of the snakes?

"You're adjusting rather well," Stan said to Sophie.

"This is a continuation, isn't it?" she said brightly. "Telling myself a story was how I stayed free."

She was certainly plucky. Sophie's enthusiasm would fill the void left by Solli's deceitfulness, and death.

"It's rather a pity," said Peter, "that we can't ever present the Tale of Solli. *The Tragedy of Solveig*: that's what we'd call it. . . . How she imagined that the Pootaran part of her was a jinx-in-waiting. How she hated her whore of a grandmother. How she conned Tapper Kippan's daughter. How she tried to become maestro—to control people, just like some female Tycho. How she mutated monstrously and died in fits."

"Hang on," growled Stan. "Not while her body's still lying just beside us."

"You said that we can't ever do such a show," protested Natti, "yet you're already busy concocting it!"

"How do you know she hated her granny?" asked Tan.

"Because it's *appropriate!* Dramatically! She must have hated the woman. Ach, maybe she didn't—but she *pretended to Tilly* that she did! What ambitions Solli nursed. No, we can't ever act this out. A cuckoo would cackle. The Isi would hear. They would know about the mootapu sap, and what went wrong. Imbricate might figure out a way of controlling people after all, just like Jutties. Wait a moment! Could we leave the sap out, and put something else in its place? Solli's gran had power, and laid a curse on her. . . . Such a shame to lose Tilly from the tale! But we couldn't tour the Forest Lord's realm again if we exposed his daughter's antics. We shouldn't do so, in any event! That would be unprofessional. . . ."

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"Quite so," said Natti. "Tilly did give me a pair of shoes too, even if they don't fit!"

"It's a private tragedy, this. Ah, what a waste. Private, private, damn it. Though not private from you, Sophie. You're included, you understand? You're a part of this—and a part of us."

"I *still* hardly know what happened! There are such gaps. I'm guessing."

"I'll tell you the whole tale," promised Peter. "Starting from when we pitched camp here last night—and leaping back to Kip'an'keep and even earlier." He laughed harshly. "Beware you don't get trapped in this tale! Or that I don't get so caught up that I forget to go to sleep tonight."

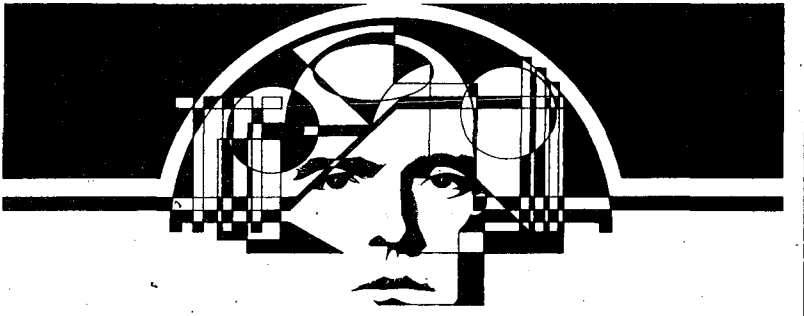
"Peter," warned Stan softly, "her corpse is in earshot."

In the darkness: a sack.

"May the story bring her peace if she can hear it!" Peter searched for a word. "This is her *requiem*."

"I *want* to be trapped in this tale, along with you," declared their new friend. "I was snared in my own tale far too long."

Peter took a deep breath. "Well now, Sophie, it's like this: *somebody* had been stalking us all afternoon. . . ." ●



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ON BOOKS

Norman Spinrad

VIRTUAL REALITY

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Raphael Carter
Tor, $21.95, 288pp.
PANDA RAY
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St. Martin's Press, $20.95, 224pp.
PIRATES OF THE UNIVERSE
Terry Bisson
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Walter Jon Williams
HarperPrism, $5.99, 359pp.
RIM: A NOVEL OF VIRTUAL REALITY
Alexander Besher
HarperPrism, $5.99, 310pp.

For once, a major mutation in the marketing of SF, and one which in the long run may herald a literary mutation as well, seems to have begun not in the United States, but in Europe.

I first became aware of this in a science fiction specialty book store in Stockholm, Sweden. Not that much SF being published in Swedish, and most Swedes interested in the genre being able to read English, the store had a lot of English-language science fiction. It even had a large dump from a British publisher featuring several titles by diverse authors.

But the header on the dump didn't even mention "science fiction" or even "SF." Instead, the books therein, clearly science fiction by any functional literary definition, were labeled "Cyberpunk," which was proclaimed in fulsome terms as a "new form of consciousness."

In retrospect, this began to illuminate the strange sort of questions people had been asking on my last trip to Romania. Are you a Cyberpunk writer? Is Kim Stanley Robinson? Is Gregory Benford? Is (I kid you not!) *Orson Scott Card* a Cyberpunk?

Well, when intelligent people who *have* read his work seriously ponder the notion that Orson Scott Card might be a Cyberpunk, something strange must surely be going on.

And lately, the same sort of thing seems to be happening in France. The magic word is being plastered on more things than previously dreamt of in the old Movement philosophies. The word "Cyberpunk" is shifting meaning, at least in Europe—a shift created not so much by writers or critics as by marketing necessity.

Since the 1950s in western Europe and since the breakup of the Soviet empire in the east, Euro-

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pean SF publishing has been dominated by translated American imports. But the great expansion in the number of annual SF titles published in the United States over the past 20 or so years was not mirrored in most European countries, Britain being to some extent an exception, and post-Ceaucescu Romania another. But even the number of annual SF titles being published in Britain and Romania has been only about twenty percent of the annual American production.

So for a long time, the European SF publishers were able to pick and choose, to skim what they considered the cream of the crop, which was the main reason American product became so dominant. And because most European SF readers grew up under these circumstances, they were conditioned to accept American SF as superior to the relatively small amount of indigenous science fiction that managed to get published.

But the last half-decade or so, at least from a continental European perspective, has seen a devolution in American science fiction publishing. The endless franchise universe novels and TV and movie novelizations which now have come to dominate "SF publishing" in the United States are viewed over here, not to put too fine a line on it, as a huge load of crap, suitable perhaps for a larger downscale audience, but not for the older and/or more sophisticated science fiction audience developed down through the years.

Which is not to say that British and French and other European publishers aren't starting to cash in on this stuff. But since the material *is* labeled "science fiction," "SF," or "sci-fi," those terms have become intellectually devalued, and are becoming synonymous with cynical juvenile yard-goods.

So in Europe at least, the perception has arisen that writers as different as Kim Stanley Robinson, Pat Cadigan, Tim Powers, Philip K. Dick, and yes, Orson Scott Card, among a score or two others, despite their literary divergences, have more in common with each other than any of them do with the aforementioned huge load of crap that has now come to dominate the product marketed as "science fiction" or "SF." And in terms of level of literary intent, this is quite true.

And in marketing terms, literary questions aside, the audience demographics are different too—older, less dominantly male, more well-read, smaller than the potential audience for the latest slice of *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* and therefore better off disassociated from "SF" and packaged as something else.

Which, Mr. Card, in case you were wondering, is how you became a Cyberpunk in Romania.

But why *Cyberpunk?*

Why not?

You got a better idea?

Can you come up with a trendier label? With another word that conjures up the imagery and concerns of science fiction in the mind of the public at large without evoking

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Star Trek or *Star Wars* or flying saucers from the Planet Schlock?

So what if much of the stuff starting to be published as "Cyberpunk" has nothing to do with cybernetics, cyberspace, or the sensibility of the Street? Neither Bill Gibson nor Gardner Dozois nor Bruce Sterling were mercenarily prescient enough to copyright the label, now were you guys, hah, hah, hah!

And after all, what do unicorns, dragons, and elves have to do with "sci-fi," the rubric under which *they* are marketed? Forrest J. Ackerman, the proud daddy thereof, didn't think to copyright that label either.

So "Cyberpunk"—like "sci-fi," like "SF"—has lost the coherence of its original literary meaning and passed into the public domain of the packagers and marketeers.

And yet, in the process of this literary demise and commercial transfiguration, it seems to be giving birth to a literary descendant presently emerging from its swaddling clothes whose long-term impact on what we curmudgeonly literary types still persist in calling "science fiction" may end up being far more profound.

Namely "Virtual Reality Fiction."

Talk about science fiction in the real world!

The concept of relating to a sensory surround generated by technology on the same psychological level as the "real world" is decades old, as old as my own *Riding the Torch,* as old as Samuel R. Delaney's *Nova,* as old as all those tales of the "feelies" stretching back into dim science fictional prehistory.

But in *Neuromancer,* William Gibson turned it into an artificial "place" called "Cyberspace." And then the evolution of the Internet actually called Cyberspace into primitive being.

And Jarron Lanier invented the gloves and goggles whereby one might actually enter Cyberspace and interact therein with other electronic extensions of other protoplasmic beings. And dubbed the gear a "virtual reality interface."

And the rest is marketing history.

Voilà, Virtual Reality in the real world!

True, what's presently being marketed as "Virtual Reality" amounts to a jazzed-up set of joysticks, a couple of mini-monitors in your face, a computer, and a CD-ROM deck, with which to enter a realm of comparatively low-definition video games, the reality of whose virtuality is limited to sight and sound, as your middle ear will tell you in no uncertain stomach-turning terms when you unplug from a session lasting more than a few minutes.

But primitive as this equipment may presently be, marketing has made the *concept* of Virtual Reality so pervasive that it is beginning to not only shape a certain species of science fiction but may be creating a new sort of fiction that blurs the line between fantasy and science fiction, mimesis and surrealism, and alas, perhaps, at least in

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one instance, the awareness that such a line even exists.

It may be only a matter of time before the marketeers realize that they already have a pre-existing label under which to market much of the sort of stuff they're beginning to try to shoe-horn into the "Cyberpunk" genre.

After all, "Virtual Reality" is already in the public domain of the zeitgeist, and since it doesn't automatically conjure up images of computer hackers in black leather and mirror-shades, it can more comfortably clothe a wider variety of product without violating any truth in advertising laws.

It's a seductive literary and even philosophical concept, too.

Why cannot *all* reality be treated as virtual?

If sophisticated enough technology can enable creatures of the "real world" such as ourselves to enter virtual realities, why can it not allow the electronic ghosties and ghoulies thereof to enter *ours?*

A scientific philosopher could give you a good line of reasoning as to why this is sophistry, but a mystical philosopher of a certain bent would contend that since the realm of Maya is an illusion, what we think of as "reality" is indeed virtual already and always has been. And since this is an argument which has been going on for several thousand years, I'm not going to be able to reveal the ultimate nature of reality here. Sorry about that, folks.

But since all *fictions* are undeniably virtual realities created by the author, in *literary* terms, you may well ask, why not?

Well, as long as you want to write fantasy, no reason in the world, but when the literary goal is mimesis of either present or past realities, you will lose credibility if you violate the rules of what your readers accept as the consensus reality, although in this age of the New Age, you now have more leeway than you might have had in days of recent yore.

Science fiction, though, plays a somewhat different game than either fantasy or mimetic fiction, or at least it has in the past.

Unlike mimetic, science fiction *requires* the literary violation of the consensus reality of its readers, since this is basically the speculative element that makes science fiction science fiction.

But unlike fantasy, science fiction must do this within constraints. The hard SF types would contend that science fiction must not violate the basic known laws of the physical universe, and even unreconstructed old New Wavers would at least agree that anything that lacks verisimilitude, that doesn't at least create the literary *illusion* that it is taking place within the realm of the possible, can't even be "speculative fiction" by definition.

The nascent genre of Virtual Reality fiction, however, blurs the line between science fiction and fantasy from one point of view, or transcends it from another.

The Fortunate Fall, an excellent if imperfect first novel by Raphael

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Carter, is a relatively conservative example of this burgeoning new genre, a lineal descendant, in a manner of speaking, of D.G. Compton's *The Unsleeping Eye*.

In the Compton, a TV reporter has a camera and a microphone implanted in her head; twenty years on, Carter's reporter, Maya Andreyeva, has a virtual reality rig implant, broadcasting not merely what she sees and hears to the TV audience, but what she feels, and even her emotional reactions to it.

Maya, like most people in this future, has various electronic implants and augments connecting her to the virtual reality of the Net, though given the nature of her occupation, more than most.

The novel takes place in a strangely transmogrified and vaguely Americanized future Russia, which at some point in the past had been conquered by a kind of western Friendly Fascism called the Guardians, reminiscent somehow of Disney-McDonald's in jackboots, leaving a situation in which allusions to the "classics" by people like Maya are references to old American TV shows like *Leave It to Beaver*.

An attempt by hackers to liberate the world from this tyranny took the form of injecting a software virus into the Net, creating a kind of electronically infectious hive mind called the Unanimous Army, which turned individual humans into "soldier ants," a cure which proved nastier than the disease and was narrowly defeated.

At first in order to keep such an occurrence from repeating and later on general control-freak principles, the Post (as in Emily) police were created to keep nanny-like tabs on people's interfacing with the Net. These being ordinary citizens taken over by downloaded programs and/or entities for short periods of time.

Maya gets a new screener, Keishi—a "screener" being a kind of online editor and producer of the thoughts, images and emotions she broadcasts and all purpose supergopher in the electronic sense of the term—who is in love with her, but who she never meets in the flesh until near the end of the book.

There's a central character walking around in a human body whose consciousness is an electronically mediated amalgam of a human and a whale, there's a very much further advanced African civilization off-camera run by godlike human-electronic constructs of various strange natures, and there are the "Weavers," the electronic (but far more powerful and ominous) equivalent of the Post police, entities who once were human, at least most of them, but who have downloaded (or uploaded, depending on your point of view) themselves to the Net and are now discorporate dybbuks of that consensus virtual reality.

There's much more in this vein, plus a mystery, a satisfying story which resolves itself well in its own terms, philosophical sophistication, irony, and elegant writing. All

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in all, *The Fortunate Fall* is an excellent first novel, an excellent novel by any criterion, good enough so that it is not stretching things very far to say that it marks Raphael Carter as less of a promising writer to watch than one who has arrived already.

However. . . .

However, there is something mildly disturbing here that will emerge full-blown when we get to Alexander Besher's *Rim*. *The Fortunate Fall* is a traditional science fiction novel in that Carter does indeed attempt to create verisimilitude; the feeling, the conviction, that however outré and improbable the events, they are taking place within the realm of the possible. And, given his puissant prose, psychological depth, and imaginative detail of extrapolation, he pretty much succeeds.

But. . . .

But this is a literary illusion. Once you stop to think about it, Carter's treatment of the virtual reality of the Net becomes somewhat logically threadbare. Okay, so somehow future technology may enable not just sensoria but emotions to be broadcast. Okay, so maybe technology will eventually allow people to upload their personalities to the Net; I can hardly argue with that, having posited it myself in *Deus X* and even pondered the question of whether such successor entities have *souls* or not.

Carter, however, seems at some points to have such virtual entities entering the physical realm and interacting therein as if they had physical existence. It remains somewhat ambiguous, there is a certain razzmatazz obscuring it, and Carter is such a skilled writer that he keeps the issue from being much more than somewhat disturbing.

But it *is* disturbing nevertheless, not the least because it demonstrates that a skilled writer who knows what he's doing can make it glide smoothly down almost all readers' gullets, including, except for this little caveat here, even my own.

And while it's certainly credible for the loas of the bits and the bytes to appear as holographic images or to affect physical reality by seizing control of the hardware or the meatware, we all know that it's crossing the line between science fiction and fantasy when they assume direct physical existence therein.

We *do* all know that, don't we?

Don't we?

Michael Kandel certainly seems to in *Panda Ray*, in which he uses a rather different set of literary skills to create a Virtual Reality novel of a converse kind.

In a certain sense, Kandel has never really been a science fiction writer at all. *Panda Ray*, no less than his previous novels, makes no pass at verisimilitude, no serious attempt to convince anyone not seriously stoned that it takes place in the realm of the possible. Christopher Zimmerman is an alien child masquerading as a typical human kid in a typical small town and his

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alien family is even weirder. They have various arcane powers, including the ability to travel backward and forward and sideways in time, as well as through any number of different flavors of reality.

When he boasts of this to his human classmates once too often, Mom decides he must be "scooped out," a fate considerably worse than death, and with the help and companionship of his anarchic renegade alien grandfather, off he flees on what the galley blurb copy calls "a journey through space, time, and other less recognizable dimensions, and into a classic science fiction adventure."

Uh-uh.

Right about the picaresque journey, but dead wrong about the "classic science fiction adventure." Far from being classic science fiction, *Panda Ray* isn't science fiction at all, but a kind of fantasy utilizing *science fiction imagery and tropes*, which is something entirely different.

Namely a kind of Magical Surrealism in which the author uses the overfamiliar schtick of "classic science fiction adventure"—aliens among us, time travel, the galactic midway, etc.—without the pretense that any of it is taking place in other than a virtual and entirely literary reality.

Satire, you say? Well, maybe. Kandel *can* be quite funny, and a lot of this stuff—from Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse Five* to William Burroughs's *Nova Express*—has been sloppily labeled "satire." And yes, there is a certain amount of send-up of traditional SF here.

But if *Panda Ray* is humor, then it is what *Mad* magazine used to call in the old EC days "humor in a jugular vein." Michael Kandel has always seemed to specialize in this sort of thing, the razor-blade inside the slapstick.

Yes, *Panda Ray* could be accurately described as a madcap romp through myriad surrealistically amusing virtual realities. But it could be just as accurately described as the story of a boy's desperate attempt to escape from an implacable monster of a mother out to murder him. And without giving too much away, I doubt if the ending is going to leave you laughing.

It is Kandel's peculiar genius to maintain an undercurrent of uneasy psychological dread throughout the sort of thing that seems to breeze along a superficially lighthearted gonzo surface. Or contrariwise, to cloak a tale of true nastiness in the vestments of humor.

Insofar as he has done this within the superficial genre trappings of "classic science fiction" and with a most adult and sophisticated irony, Michael Kandel would seem to be the kind of writer for whom the genre of "Virtual Reality" is in the process of being invented as a marketing category.

In *Pirates of the Universe*, on the other hand, Terry Bisson seems to be following the vector of the "postmodern space opera" pioneered by

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Colin Greenland in *Take Back Plenty*.

Well, sort of.

Like *Take Back Plenty, Pirates of the Universe* takes a not particularly scientifically convincing science fictional set-up as a literary given, a virtual literary reality, and takes it more or less seriously in story terms, skating just a few millimeters away from the edge of parody.

But while this novel hardly attempts verisimilitude, the schlocko title is deliberately deceiving. This is not a post-modern tale of space piracy at all. "Pirates of the Universe" is a *Disney theme park housing development,* entry to which the protagonist, Gunther Glenn, aspires as the ultima Thule of his existence.

Bisson's gonzo twenty-first century solar system is one in which Disney, Microsoft, McDonald's, and so forth, have just about taken over *everything,* where cute artificial creatures are trademarked, where familiar brand names stick to everything like fungus, where most everything that can be marketed is, down to funeral ceremonies, and where Gun Glenn's main squeeze is a generic denizen of a pay-for-play virtual reality parlor the specific memory of whom he can't afford to pay for.

Satire, right?

Hah, hah?

Except on the very day I am writing this, I've just read of the huge deal between Disney and McDonald's to use Disney characters to market greaseburgers, and the Golden Arches to market Disney merchandise items, and films and TV shows and attractions at theme parks to cross-market both. Pepsi, which owns Pizza Hut, among other fast food chains, has countered by make a similar deal with Lucasfilms for the *Star Wars* characters, while reportedly the new *Star Wars* films will feature younger versions of these familiar icons in order to enhance the possibilities with the kiddies.

Hah, hah.

Superficially, Terry Bisson is doing something like one of Greenland's post-modern space operas, in which the imagery and tropes of SF are simply taken for granted and used as the virtual literary reality for a kind of fantasy without really bothering with establishing scientific credibility, and something like *Panda Ray,* in which the laughs are in the deadpan surreality. But there's something else going on here beneath the surface—or perhaps right along it—despite the action plot-line, the seemingly lightly satirical attitude, and the deliberately sci-fi title. Unlike the usual post-modern space opera or Kandel's brand of Magical Science Fictional Surrealism, *Pirates of the Universe* is a political novel.

Bisson doesn't preach, there are no exhortations to off the pigs, the novel reads almost relentlessly light-heartedly, but you can sense a certain political passion here.

Pirates of the Universe is reminiscent in many ways of Frederik Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants,* down to the dou-

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ble entendre game played with the title.

The space merchants in the title of *The Space Merchants* refer not to any dealings in *outer* space, but to the peddlers of *advertising* space in a future in which advertising agencies rule the world, just as Bisson's pirates of the universe are not the usual buccaneers of the asteroid belt but the *real* pirates of the universe. That is, the forces which even now are in the process of *pirating* the phenomenological universe itself, namely the likes of Disney and McDonald's and Pepsi and Coke, who even now have turned the Olympic Games and Pocahontas, Darth Vader and Mickey Mouse, the Hunchback of Notre Dame and Asterix, into trademarked merchandising icons.

Much of Bisson's novel is set in and around Orlando, Florida, home of Disneyworld, among other less grandiose theme parks, and indeed within the virtual reality within the Dogg, a huge building for the purveyment of same built in the form of Pluto. Here Gun Glenn pays for play up the levels with the generic virtual dream girl Tiffany, to whom he relates more longingly than to his fleshly back-home down-home girlfriend.

What Bisson is demonstrating by way of exaggeration to extremis is the way culture itself—the social, economic, artistic, psychological, and even architectural surround in which we all live, in which our consciousnesses are inextricably embedded—is being pirated by the true masters of the universe, the monster corporate marketeers, by Mickey and Donald, by Goofy and Ronald, by the schlockmeister forces of Friendly Fascism turning the whole world virtual, turning everything into trademarked versions of itself.

Satire, right?

Except that one of the *real* theme parks currently under construction in the environs of the *real* Orlando is a thing called "Key West"—a sanitized, plasticized, Disneyized, PG version of the raunchy *real* Key West not more than a day's drive further south in the very same state!

Pirates of the Universe, then, is a Virtual Reality novel about the virtualization of reality itself, a process that is not exactly undetectable in what we are still currently pleased to refer to as the "real" world. Even the happy ending, such as it is, arises out of the creation of another and hopefully better pocket universe via the instrumentality of a deus ex nanomachina, rather than any return to the eternal verities of any "primary" or "natural" realm.

Science fiction like *The Space Merchants* and *Pirates of the Universe* is indeed a form of satire, but a peculiarly science fictional one. Like all satire, it creates virtual literary realities that refer to aspects of the "real" world in forms usually exaggerated beyond verisimilitude.

But unlike other forms of satire, laughter is not required, though it may be desirable, for the main satirical weapon here is the seamless transition from the world we

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know to the sardonic fictional virtualization thereof in a future whose worst improbabilities have a relentlessly logical plausibility the reader is hard put to deny.

In *Metropolitan,* Walter Jon Williams uses all the tools and tropes and techniques of traditional science fiction to turn a virtual reality in which magic works into something whose relentlessly logical plausibility even the most hidebound hard-rock aficionado of hard SF will be hard put to deny.

Yes, this sort of thing has been done many times before, but never quite like this.

Williams has created a pocket universe self-contained in space and time. This is Earth sometime in the future, but we don't ever know when, and we don't really know how our world was turned into this one or why.

The entire planet is englobed by the Shield, an impenetrable force field set up and maintained by the Ascended, whoever and whatever they are. All our present-day ethnicities, religions, and cultures have disappeared along with almost all of the memories thereof, replaced by a panoply of latter-day cognates, whose credibility is not only enhanced by the inventiveness and richness of what is detailed but also by how much is cleverly unexplained or left out.

The Earth has not only been thoroughly balkanized, it has been thoroughly urbanized, everywhere connected to everywhere by complicated and often creaky public transit systems. Technology seems advanced over ours in some ways, degenerate in others; or rather perhaps what we have here is an advanced technosphere in a state of stagnation and nascent decay, like the world of Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil,* like parts of present-day London and Bucharest, like East Berlin early on in the process of being absorbed by the west.

There's a Jules Verne solidity to it, all girders and ductwork and massively clanking machineries, a Victorian feel of iron and stone and steam somehow, beautifully and cunningly rendered.

Cunningly because it sets up a perfect context within which a peculiarly technological kind of magic works.

Williams has posited a form of energy called "plasm."

Plasm is the underlying force of the universe or some such thing. It is generated by geomancy, by the spacial relations of buildings, masses of rock and metal, and so forth, to each other. It can allow adepts to materialize a kind of astral body to order in the real world. It can cure illness and heal wounds. It can blast aircraft from the sky. It can act like an addictive drug. It can transport you to virtual realities.

It's magic.

But, like the electricity that made magic in the nineteenth century and the petroleum that fueled the twentieth, plasm is a *technological* magic.

It's measurable. It's not unlimited. You can generate more of it by the proper geomantic siting of new

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structures. Existing structures generate a quantifiable amount. It flows along circuitry much like electricity.

Aiah, the heroine, is a petty bureaucrat in the Plasm Authority, which controls, distributes, meters, and sells the legitimate supply of the stuff, an outfit much like an overstaffed government electric utility company somewhere in Ruritania.

There are also pools of plasm accumulated in the layers upon layers of ruins beneath the world city, much like pools of petroleum, and while it is illegal for anyone but the Plasm Authority to tap them, illicit "divers" do.

The story line is generated when Aiah lucks into one of these plasm pools, a gigantic one. She sets up clever circuitry to control and channel it, replete with "wires" and "valves," and ends up selling it to Constantine, a powerful mage, who instructs her in clever ways of laundering the money, and enlists her in a complex coup attempt in another part of the world city.

Aiah's affair with the charismatic Constantine, her initiation and development as a magician of plasm, and the political and military complications of the coup form the main storyline, and in story terms at least, *Metropolitan* reads more like a political science fiction novel or even a thriller than what one would usually think of as fantasy.

Usually, I flee the question of whether a novel is fantasy or science fiction like the Talmudic plague, but with *Metropolitan* and in the present context, I would contend that here it is germane and central to contend that this novel is science fiction and not fantasy.

Williams's characters call his plasm technology "magic" often enough, but I would contend that they are wrong, that it is what I have elsewhere called a "rubber science"; that is, a fictional science created by a writer for story purposes, which, while it may not work in the real world, follows all the rules of one that does in the virtual world of the novel.

Is "plasm" any more magical or any less "scientific" than "psionics" or "parapsychology" or "hyperspace" or "time-travel"?

I would contend not.

Outside the realm of relentless and rigorous hard science fiction that insists on violating no known laws of matter, time, and energy, *most* science fiction contains this sort of rubber science. Little of it is as rigorously logical and technologically plausible given its single fictional postulate as Williams makes plasm technology in *Metropolitan,* and the only thing that makes it magic in the fictional context of the novel is that Williams *calls* it magic.

Which is what makes *Metropolitan* not only a well-realized work but a hopeful landmark of sorts in the evolution of Virtual Reality fiction out of science fiction via Cyberpunk.

For while post-modern space opera self-consciously plays loose and fast with the physical facts of existence and still proclaims itself science fiction, here we have a

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book that could almost pass for hard science fiction, down to the profusion of gears and grommets and machinery that needs oiling in the night, that, by evoking the singular word "magic," declares itself fantasy.

In a peculiar way then, Walter Jon Williams reveals himself as a science fiction purist, a rigorous hard SF guy even, by labeling plasm "magic."

What he seems to be saying thereby is, "Naw, it may walk like science fiction, it may talk like science fiction, but since plasm violates the physical laws of the universe as we know them, it can't be science fiction, so it must be fantasy."

Old-fashioned this attitude may be in the borning age of the Virtual Reality novel, but in the context of something like Alexander Besher's *Rim*, refreshingly clear-minded and admirable.

The "Rim" of the title is the Pacific Rim wherein the action takes place—in California, in an orbital space station, in various virtual realities, in Neo-Tokyo which has been sort of virtualized itself—in a twenty-first century in which California has been Japanized and Japan has been Californiated, the New Age thoroughly cybernated, and visa versa.

Besher's protagonist, Frank Gobi, former psychic private eye (more or less) and present professor of "transcultural corporate anthropology and organizational shamanism" at U.C. Berkeley, is hired to find and retrieve the missing download of the head of the Satori Corporation, whose virtual reality, Satori City, has crashed, or been hacked by forces unknown, leaving millions of temporarily downloaded consciousnesses trapped inside, including Gobi's son, Trevor.

Off Gobi goes on a complicated odyssey of detection, intrigue, sex, and adventure that takes him from California to Neo-Tokyo via an orbital station, with many sojourns in various flavors of virtual realities, Japanified, New Age, and weird combinations of both, in between.

Meanwhile, via the viewpoint of Trevor, we get the grand misguided tour of the interior of the crashed Satori City, invaded by, among other things, Himalayan demons who are also androids (or possibly robots) of a sort.

Rim is one of the most maddening novels I've read in quite a while. Besher writes a nice line of prose. He has a sense of humor. He has psychological depth. He has irony. He is endlessly inventive. He has a fresh new viewpoint and angle of attack.

But. . . .

But much of the time it's impossible to tell whether he's writing a send-up of the excesses of New Age blather or whether he's taking it seriously, and half the time one has the impression he may not be sure himself.

And while *Rim* has all the trappings of Cyberpunk, much of it in extremis, the science itself, to be charitable, is ludicrous. Gobi takes

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a "limousine" from a space station in a geosynchronous low Earth orbit above Neo-Tokyo, to cite one of the more egregious examples.

There's something far more profoundly wrong with this book than silly scientific howlers or uncertain tone. *Rim* is well-written. It is entertaining when it doesn't get bogged down in incomprehensibilities. It is funny when it doesn't take itself seriously, or for that matter, maybe when it does.

It seems to have been something of a commercial and even critical success, and of late I have heard agents and editors speaking of the desire to publish "New Age" novels or even "New Age" science fiction.

Now don't get me wrong. I practice a form of yoga, I have an interest in Japanese culture and eastern mysticism, and I've even written a recent novel with an intellectually sympathetic character who takes such stuff and more quite seriously. I do not believe that everything connected with the New Age sensibility is vibrating bullshit.

Nor am I slavishly wedded to mimesis or verisimilitude. Some of my best friends are literary surrealists, and I have been known to engage in the practice from time to time myself.

Furthermore, this has been a more or less favorable consideration of the evolving genre of Virtual Reality fiction, which at least holds the promise of freeing "science fiction" from certain undesirable literary and marketing constraints.

But what *Rim* demonstrates is that here there be tygers.

It's one thing to write Virtual Reality fiction like than of Michael Kandel or Terry Bisson that demonstrates to the reader that the author knows damn well that the various realities therein *are* virtual. There's a very long and honorable tradition of such stuff that includes writers as diverse as Borges and Burroughs, Kafka and Pynchon.

Virtual Reality fiction that *knows* it's Virtual Reality fiction.

What disturbs me so about *Rim* is that it doesn't.

Besher seems to think that this is science fiction, or at least he's written the book as if he does. Everything seems to take place on the same level of reality—or perhaps unreality—Himalayan demons, downloaded corporate mavens, space stations, cyberspace, transcendental consciousness, serious mystical insights, fatuous New Age psychobabble, samurai warriors, virtual people, and possibly even simultaneous send-ups of all of the above.

I find Walter Jon Williams's punctiliousness in labeling the plasm technology in *Metropolitan* magic, and therefore what is otherwise a science fiction novel a fantasy, touching and refreshing in juxtaposition to something like *Rim* because what Besher seems to have done is precisely the opposite.

He's taken serious mystical insight, New Age blather, computer babble, bits and pieces of plausible technology, zero-g shenanigans,

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umpteen different sorts of virtual existences, silly superstitions, astrology, astronomy, management theory, and whatever else seems to have been laying around in the intellectual attic, run it all through a blender, and written what comes out the other end as if it were science fiction, with all the literary tools designed to create the illusion of verisimilitude thereof, down to overusing the Gibsonian technique of slapping recognizable brand names on everything almost to the point of parody.

Besher has written a species of Virtual Reality novel that virtualizes *all* realities, that treats technology on exactly the same level as magic, mystical experience on the same level as manga, astrology on the same level as astronomy, and not as if they are all equally surreal image systems, but as if they are all equally credible maps of phenomenological reality.

What can I say, you pays your money, and you makes your choice.

I say this is bullshit, and I say the hell with it. Sinister bullshit, even.

I earnestly hope that this is not the future of science fiction.

I earnestly fear that it may be.

Along with certain editors who seem to be searching for such so-called New Age fiction, I believe that there is probably a large market out there for such stuff, larger than the market for what we presently consider "science fiction."

A market for a form of fiction that mixes the tropes and imagery of science fiction and fantasy interchangeably and acknowledges no difference between them.

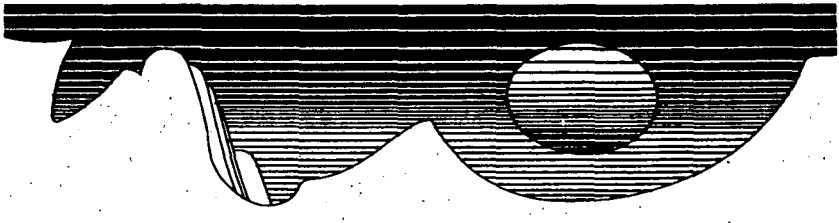
A form of fiction either cunningly designed to appeal to the large masses of people out there who do not recognize or do not *want* to recognize that there *is* a difference or written by people in a sincere state of such intellectual ignorance themselves.

Not Virtual Reality fiction that acknowledges surreality as the nature of its literary game, but a form of fantasy written by skilled writers in a manner designed to create the illusion of verisimilitude, so as to mask its true nature.

Voilà, *Virtual Science Fiction!* ●

CORRECTION:

The striking cover art for our October/November 1996 issue was by Fred Gambino.



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Our own Gardner Dozois and Stan Schmidt are on tap at cons this fall. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107-B Autumn Woods Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

OCTOBER 1996

24-27—**Northstar.** For info, write: **c/o 1234 W. Hastings, Vancouver BC V6E 2M4.** Or phone: **(604) 583-1972** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Harrison BC (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Harrison Hot Springs Hotel. Guests will include: S. M. Stirling, R. Graeme Cameron.

25-27—**MileHiCon. (303) 426-0806.** Regency, Denver CO. Frederik Pohl, artists D. H. Stein and David Martin.

25-27—**OVFF. (800) 272-6232.** Ramada East, Columbus OH. D. Clement, Fish, Cecil, N. Smith. SF folksinging.

25-27—**ConCinnity. (613) 831-7129.** *Comfort Inn, Kanata (Ottawa) ON. L. Stewart, L. & Y. Penney. Low-key.*

25-27—**Ditto. (800) 585-8754.** Camino Real Paso del Norte Hotel, El Paso TX. Fanzine fans' relaxacon.

25-27—**Fan Faire. (864) 370-9704.** Greenville SC. A little of everything. About 200 fans expected.

26-27—**GammaCon.** Sheraton Four Points, Texarkana TX. Longstreet, Ledet, Conrad, Middleton, E. Mitchell.

31-Nov. 3—**World Fantasy Con. (312) 871-2722.** Hyatt, Schaumburg (Chicago) IL. K. Kurtz, Lansdale, Lumley.

NOVEMBER 1996

1-3—**Primedia. (905) 820-3844.** *Days Inn Airport, Mississauga (Toronto) ON. Chris Carter. For media fans.*

1-3—**WishCon. (617) 986-9952.** Springfield MA. A thousand Star Trek and Dr. Who fans expected.

1-3—**Anime Weekend. (404) 364-9773.** Holiday Inn Airport South, Atlanta GA. For Japanese animation fans.

8-10—**Antares, Box 1273, Lilburn GA 30226. (404) 923-6566.** Harvey Powers Fy., Atlanta GA. Yolen, Turtledove.

8-10—**Constellation, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815. (205) 883-4493.** Tom Bevill Center. Schmidt, Airoldi, R. Cook.

8-10—**NotJustAnotherCon, c/o SCUM, RSO 16, UMass, Amherst MA 01003. (413) 545-1924.** Campus Center Hotel.

8-10—**OryCon, Box 5703, Portland OR 97228. (502) 283-0802.** Red Lion Columbia River. Duane, Morwood, Dozois.

8-10—**WindyCon, Box 184, Palatine IL 60078. (708) 383-6948.** Hyatt. Schaumburg (Chicago) IL. A major con.

8-10—**SciCon, Box 9434, Hampton VA 23670. (804) 865-1407.** Holiday Inn Ex. Ctr., Virginia Beach VA. Sheffield.

8-10—**NovaCon, 14 Park St., Lye, Stourbridge W. Mids. DY9 8S, UK. (0138) 482-5386.** Hotel Ibis, Birmingham UK.

15-17—**SoonerCon, Box 892687, Oklahoma City OK 73189. (405) 634-5442.** Lincoln Hotel. Over 1000 fans expected.

15-17—**TropiCon, Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307. (954) 524-1274.** Doubletree. D. Gerrold, P. David

22-24—**PhilCon, Box 8303, Philadephia PA 19101. (215) 957-4004.** Adam's Mark. Frederik Pohl. 60 years of cons.

22-24—**ConCat, 316 E. Scott Ave., Knoxville TN 37917. (615) 523-6986.** Radisson. C. L. Grant, A. Clark, W. Webb.

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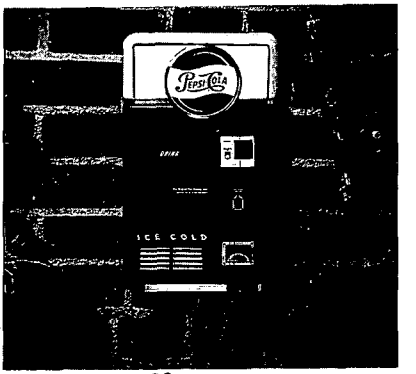

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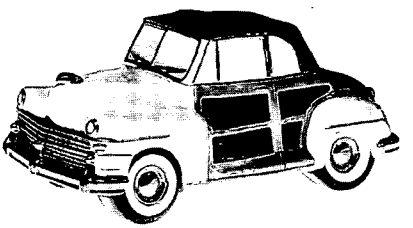

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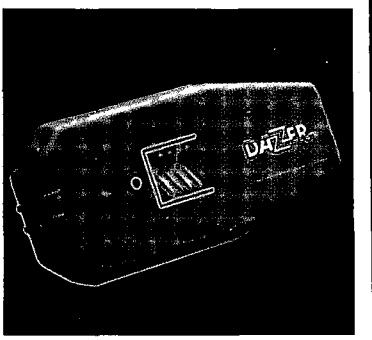
The Ultrasonic Deterrent - The Dazer™



The Dazer is a hand held dog deterrent. Utilizing safe, humane, ultra sound technology the Dazer is a must for joggers, bicyclists, the postman and especially kids and seniors. The Dazer works by producing a discomforting, but not harmful, high frequency sound audible only to dogs. Unlike mace and other chemical deterrents there is no harm to the animal. Its compact, lightweight and features a belt clip for easy carrying. Shipped with a 9 volt battery. **#2SF202**

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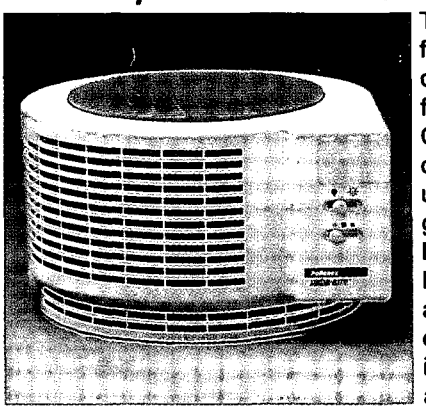
Table Top IONIZER Air Freshener - with Three Filters



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